The Beginning of Knowledge

by ancientreader

Summary

Jim's lessons are hard to unlearn.

Notes

Under the intellectual union of man and man, which works by precept, lies a holier union of affection, working by example; the influences of which latter, mystic, deep-reaching, all-embracing, can still less be computed. For Love is ever the beginning of Knowledge, as fire is of light; and works also more in the manner of fire.

-Thomas Carlyle, "Goethe: His Character"

Please be aware that "The Beginning of Knowledge" includes explicit descriptions of the sexual abuse of an adolescent. I'll warn in the notes for the chapter in which it occurs. Also, if the topic is a difficult one for you, you should know that the story as a whole deals with the effects on Sherlock of Jim's abuse of him in Part 1. Finally, Sherlock's work brings him into situations involving violent crime, and as this is canon I haven't warned for it.
separately. There's one gruesome description of crime scene photos, which I will flag in the relevant chapter.

Death of the author, and all, and Read What Thou Wilt Shall Be the Whole of the Law; that having been said, I think many aspects of this fic will make better emotional sense if you also read "Curriculum Vitae," part one of this series. Just saying!

ETA: There is now marvelous cover art by fiorinda_chancellor — beautiful and evocative and just perfect. Go see!
The Fallacy of Cartesian Dualism (2010)

Chapter Summary

An army doctor and a consulting detective walk into a physiotherapist's office ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four men are lying on the ground in Afghanistan, more or less seventy kilometers southwest of Camp Bastion. The May sky is, of course, cloudless and blue; one of the men is alive, and by chance he is also face-up. In the dirt beside his right hand lies his radio. Gasping, he closes his eyes against the glare. Please, God, he thinks, let me live, but this isn’t a prayer to God, because the man does not imagine either that there’s a god or that if there were such an entity it would respond to prayer. Things in the world respond to what is done in the world. Right now, his body is responding to the fact that a solid object has passed through its left shoulder, so the man is bleeding out into the sand. Maybe it’s his body that the man is begging. Maybe right now his body might as well be God. What his body does before the MERT arrives will determine whether he continues to mutter meaningless prayers to it. The phrase “Cartesian dualism” floats past him, written in black letters on a green banner that flaps in the wind. He took an introductory philosophy class once, but he’s a doctor. He ought to be able to do something about the banner, sew it down or something, stop it moving. He bleeds and gasps. Come on, come on. He’s fairly sure he can hear the rotors now. He called. Didn’t he call? Please—

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Sherlock is coming home after a case, nothing much more strenuous than the average: a night of surveillance and videoing, to establish which security guard was being paid off to look the other way while a hacker slipped into company premises to break into the non-Internet-connected systems where the most sensitive product-development data were stored; the shadowing of the hacker to the public library whose computers he used to communicate with his paymasters; a wait for his own clients’ security team to rendezvous with their police liaison, who will arrest the hacker while he picks up breakfast at Pret before going home for an ill-deserved rest.

Getting out of the cab at Baker Street, Sherlock stumbles, catching himself against the cab door as it closes. His legs feel rubbery with exhaustion. He unlocks the street door, breathing hard, and looks up the impossible stairs.

Sherlock never stumbles.

On the fifth step, his left leg folds under him like paper; he catches himself against the wall. His right leg holds. Sherlock sits on the stairs, frowning. After some minutes have passed, he tests the left leg again. It supports his weight but he has to lead with his right leg all the way up the stairs and by the time he reaches the top that leg is trembling too.

This is the third time.

The first time was at the beginning of April, after a long chase on foot. The second time was a week ago, again after a chase. Those two times, he was able to remain standing, shakily.
Sherlock has to lean against the wall to turn the key in the lock of his flat and push open the door. He makes it to the sofa by steadying himself against the walls; *No one can see me,* he reminds himself, and takes some comfort from this. On the sofa he pulls off his coat and falls asleep, because he cannot do anything else. When he wakes it’s four in the afternoon and he can stand unsupported again.

* 

There’s nothing. There’s roaring. There’s the uncovered face of a woman, which seems odd but he can’t work out why, and a woman’s voice saying “—under now—” but then she is gone. Then he wakes up and there is light everywhere, and shouting. He tries to make a noise, but fails. He awakens and struggles and falls again. Again. Again.

At last he wakes up properly. Everything has been erased since a moment that seems to have taken place a long time ago, when Aspinall fell down and then they all heard a rifle crack. Aspinall didn’t hear it, though. Realizing this makes him feel sick and scared. Someone is looking down at him. “Captain Watson,” the someone says, gravely, and resolves into a woman wearing a camouflage surgical cap. Out of his dry throat, John pushes air in the form of a yes. She holds a straw to his lips; he suckles at it until he has a voice.

“Thank you.”

“Do you feel able to talk?”

“Nod, smile, anyway.” He takes hasty inventory: eyes yes, ears yes, feet yes, hands yes — but sodding Christ, his left shoulder—

“You have a PCA pump in your right hand.”

John takes a breath and presses the button; relief swims through him.

“All right. I’m Major Steffens. You’re at Bastion, classed as seriously wounded.” She checks the paperwork in her hand. “Your sister is Harriet Watson? She’s been notified that you’re hurt but your condition is stable.”

Not that he and Harriet have spoken in years. He wonders, vaguely, what words she found. Whether she slurred them.

“Your left shoulder armor appears to have come loose, or any road the team that picked you up noted you weren’t wearing it.”

“Trouble with the fastening,” John says.

The surgeon nods. “A bullet from a sniper rifle shattered your humerus and did various other damage to the nearby bones. It managed to miss the large axillary vessels, which is why you’re still with us. We’ve tidied up the shoulder and stabilized your condition. However, you’ll be needing either a hemiarthroplasty or a total shoulder replacement, probably the latter. In addition, there is almost certainly significant damage to the nerves. So you’re for Birmingham. Expect to fly out later today or first thing tomorrow.”

It’s like being smacked into the dirt all over again. “My mates.”

Surgeons are everywhere alike: she doesn’t quite look at him, so he knows the answer before she gives it. He nods as briskly as he can manage, and as soon as she leaves, he turns his head to the side, swallowing hard.
Sherlock considers. As a general rule he attempts, however reluctantly and grudgingly, to meet the needs of the transport. The transport has betrayed him in many ways: By responding sexually to Jim even after his mind revolted. By undermining the benefits to his thinking that his early use of cocaine had provided. By distracting him with hunger and weariness when all he wanted was to be working on a case. Nevertheless, he is obliged to tend it, because in the transport is housed the mind. Sherlock is well aware of the irony that he, materialist that he is, should separate mind from body in this way, but the alternative, to consider them as one, is unacceptable. His mind is safe, his body treacherous. He stares at his calves and admits to himself that the gastrocnemius muscles are somewhat wasted, more so on the left side, and that whatever this is shows signs of worsening. He sends an email to a former client, a neurologist.

“I’d like to locate in London.”

“You’re sure? It’s not where your salary and pension will go furthest.”

“I haven’t many expenses.” And I want to be invisible. (Not because of the cane. Because of the grief.)

“Fair enough. Certainly it shouldn’t be too difficult finding a post. You’re looking to return to civilian emergency medicine?”

Surgery is out of the question, now.

“No.” John’s vehemence surprises both of them. “Sorry. No. General medicine, please. I’m interested in clinic work.”

The placement counselor gives him a long look, but she’s perceptive enough, or at least tactful enough, not to press. John would barely be able to say it, anyway. He used to feel a savage joy in the urgency of trauma surgery and then, after he joined the RAMC, of medicine on the battlefield. The joy has been replaced by a drumbeat of dead friends, dead friends, dead friends. He has a tremor in his dominant hand. He will be happy to see nothing but allergies and sprained knees for the rest of his life.

That’s what he thinks.

Sherlock’s gait is observed, the muscles of his calves inspected, his medical history taken. He’s tempted to leave out the cocaine, but although he believes himself intimately familiar with all the sequelae of prolonged use, medicine isn’t, after all, his area, so he tells the truth. Childhood diseases?


“The thing is,” says Sherlock’s former client the neurologist, a week later, when the results are back, “your symptoms are a perfect fit for postpolio syndrome. If, that is, you had had polio.”

Sherlock’s hands fly up to his mouth. “Oh.” (An iron bedstead. Mycroft has a cane between his knees. Sherlock opens the paper bag Miss Banerjee brought him from the herbalist, and breathes the herbs inside. Someone is stealing, but it’s important not to tell.)

It’s six a.m. in New York City. While the neurologist waits, Sherlock texts Sarita. She doesn’t text back: instead, Sherlock’s mobile rings. “Of course you don’t remember. It was while your mother
was working in Nairobi, and you were only five. It turned out you’d had defective vaccine.” And then, because even half asleep Sarita is one of the least stupid people on the planet apart from Sherlock himself, there is a gasp, loud enough for the doctor to hear on the other side of his enormous desk.

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At the physiotherapists’, Sherlock makes himself nothing and no one. He speaks only as much as necessary and does his exercises without remark. He does not deduce. Much.

He needs the transport. Without the transport, he can’t solve crimes. The transport has failed him — again — and he loathes it. Loathing and need hold hands tightly, tightly, with white knuckles; Sherlock is obedient and silent through the exercises that stabilize his ankles and knees, that will help (he doesn’t allow himself to doubt) preserve the function of the long muscles of his legs. He keeps his mind as blank as possible. He never misses the twice-weekly appointments, no, not even when Lestrade phones with a case. The exercises are gentle, to avoid overtaxing his too-scanty functioning muscle fibers, so Sherlock never breaks a sweat; with no need to change out of street clothes, he can show up at a crime scene half an hour later than he otherwise would have, as elegant as always in his disarray, telling lies if he needs to account for the extra travel time. Not that he does: no one ever asks where he’s been or what took him so long. The new orthoses are lightweight arrays of carbon fiber. Sherlock could spot them on someone else in a moment, but with his trousers tailored to fit more loosely than he prefers, eyes not his won’t spot them on him.

What, after all, is another secret?

There’s little to interest him in the other patients doing their physiotherapy during the same hours. Most are regulars: the middle-aged woman with sacroiliac pain and bad knees, the elderly man whose left side is weak in consequence of a stroke, the surprisingly young man who’s also had a stroke — yes, that would have been secondary to the sickle-cell anemia … No criminals, no one who looks clever or even, for that matter, halfway alert. During the first session of the fourth week, though, a newcomer catches Sherlock’s eye.

He isn’t sure why, at first. Then he sees it’s the man’s very mildness that has drawn him, as if the man is trying to make himself small; in contradiction to or concealment of … what? The man is of average height, sturdily built, with cropped dishwater hair and, Sherlock supposes, a pleasant enough face. Like Sherlock, he does his exercises (shoulder; bone, muscle, and nerve damage; gunshot wound; add to that the truncated, fading hands-and-face tan: invalided soldier, then) in silence. Unlike Sherlock, he musters a smile for the physiotherapist when he’s done. He walks with a cane but doesn’t do physiotherapy for the leg — odd, that. He looks — the fanciful thought annoys Sherlock even as it crosses his mind — like someone standing erect, by sheer force of will, under a weight too heavy for him.

After the very next session, however, Sherlock looks up from fastening his braces to find a gaze on him, unguarded, curious, and entirely unpitying. At the other end of the gaze is the not-actually-all-that-small-or-nondescript man; in response to Sherlock’s glance he gives a brisk little nod and half a smile, apologetic. Sherlock stands, shaking down his trouser legs, and finds his iciest tone. “Well spotted, Doctor. Postpolio syndrome, quite correct. I contracted the illness in Kenya, when I was five years old, and, yes, I received both batches of adulterated vaccine and was thus left vulnerable to infection. Anything else you’d like to know?”

During this speech the man’s expression has transformed itself into one of astonished delight. He holds up a hand. “Sorry, sorry, it was obnoxious of me to stare. But that was amazing! How did you do that?”
Sherlock snorts. “It’s a physiotherapy clinic — pardon me, you will of course have been aware of that. No one pays more than casual attention to anyone else’s condition here.

“But you were fascinated. Why, then? A medical professional would know that most people of my apparent age cohort who are referred for physiotherapy have vocational or sporting injuries, or were hurt in accidents. But you must have watched as I did today’s round of the exercises meant to preserve muscular function, and perhaps identified the braces as specialized for postpolio joint stabilization. Postpolio implies polio. I look like what I am, a native of western Europe, where polio was essentially eradicated before I was born. How does someone like me come by a case of polio? The question was plain on your face.”

“Nurse.”

“What?”

“You called me ‘Doctor.’ But I might as well have been a nurse. Or a physiotherapist, for that matter.”

Sherlock draws back his head and narrows his eyes. There’s always something. “Are you?”

“No, you were spot on.” The man’s smile has taken over his whole face. Soon it will be planting flags on foreign soil. “I’m John Watson. I’m pleased to meet you and I apologize for my nosiness.”

Possibly Sherlock’s ears are ringing. Possibly he himself is the foreign soil upon which that smile has planted a flag. “Sherlock Holmes,” he says, and shakes Dr. John Watson’s extended hand.

And … that’s all. Dr. Watson says, “Well, I’m off. See you next time, I guess?” and stumps out of the changing room, leaning on his cane. Sherlock dismisses him from his mind. It is true that people have occasionally seemed friendly before, but more than a few minutes in Sherlock’s company has put paid to that. He makes sure of it.

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Dr. Watson seems to be permanently on the same appointment schedule as Sherlock. He always says hello first, which leaves Sherlock without the option of ignoring him — well, no, Sherlock admits to himself, he could ignore the greeting if he chose to, and put up with a few instances of puzzled repetition for the payoff he should want: the shrug, the dismissive look, an end to these tiresome pleasantries. Instead, he returns the hello. And then, a month after that first conversation, Lestrade texts with a case just as Sherlock steps out the door after his session, and wouldn’t you know it, Anderson is the SOCO on duty, and Sherlock has a flash of inspiration that makes him giddy. He bangs back through the clinic door and straight into the changing room, where Dr. Watson is in the middle of pulling on his pants. Interesting: his legs are symmetrical and the supposedly game one appears unscarred. His penis is sturdy and neat. Irrelevant. He’s already got his vest on, pity that, Sherlock would have liked a look at the site of the wound — anyway:

“You’re not a complete idiot.”

Watson gapes, pants halfway up his hairy thighs. Maybe he is a complete idiot. Dammit. Sherlock hates being wrong.

“You were an army doctor.”

Nod.

“Any good?”
Eyebrows up, head cocked, bit challenging that, double nod. Seems to remember his pants; finishes pulling them up. Stands evenly balanced. So the leg is psychosomatic.

“Seen a lot of violent death, then?”

Nod. Back straight.

“Too much?”

Minute shrug.

“Want to see some more?”

“What. Ah, what are you proposing, exactly?”

“A crime scene.”

“Really. Creating one?”

“No, I—” Sherlock narrows his eyes. “You’re making fun of me.”

That smile, the one Watson gave him when he deduced the man’s train of thought. “No. Well, yes, perhaps just a bit. What about a crime scene, then?”

Oh. Yes, yes, of course. Watson may not be a complete idiot, but Sherlock has been proceeding as if the man had deduced Sherlock as thoroughly as Sherlock had deduced him. “I’m a consulting detective. Scotland Yard calls me when they’re out of their depth, which is any time the pond is deeper than an inch. In this case not literally. Man bludgeoned to death, where did the diamonds go.”

Watson frowns. “He was bludgeoned with diamonds?”

“No no no no no, don’t be stupid, he was bludgeoned with an object suitable for use as a bludgeon.” Sherlock waves his hand: the specific nature of the bludgeon is almost certainly irrelevant. “But there were some diamonds and they’ve gone walkabout. Well?”

“Who could resist being called stupid and invited to a murder scene? Not John Watson, I’ll tell you. Only, give me a tick. I don’t look my best in bra and bloomers.”

Mocking him again. Sherlock draws up all his venom, but is stopped by that full-body smile, which seems to have wrapped itself around him like a shock blanket and is impeding his movements. Meanwhile, Watson has finished dressing and picked up his cane. “Lead on, Mr. Holmes.”

“Sherlock,” says Sherlock, a bit stunned.

“John.”

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After all that volubility, Sherlock says little on the cab ride over, but by the time they arrive John could swear he’s vibrating. Their destination is a straining-for-luxury apartment block, newly developed, glass front, Thames views, fitness center on premises, polished gimcrack construction: home of money managers, up-and-coming stockbrokers, and, apparently, n minus 1 gem dealers. Flat 16A is guarded by a detective sergeant who looks John over warily; she and Sherlock have a snarled exchange about her sex life and his unhealthy interest in murder, which ends in his lifting the crime scene tape and practically hauling John through. Well, that was odd.
The minus 1 is lying facedown in his lounge with his head comprehensively bashed in and a heavy vase lying tritely nearby. “It’s supposed to be personal hatred, isn’t it,” John tries, “overkill?”

Sherlock actually rolls his eyes. “Yes, or the killer panicked — the choice of murder weapon makes it clear this wasn’t planned. Or was not surpassingly clever and didn’t realize he’d got well past the point of enough to make Mr. Tomasello here stay down.”

As his nonexistent forensic skills will be no help to Sherlock, what is John doing here? He’s feeling more than out of place, seeing the frosty reception Sherlock got despite the presumable invitation from the Metropolitan Police. At least the exhausted-looking DI is civil — though: “Sherlock, you’ve got two minutes. I shouldn’t even have you here and you know it.”

Sherlock ignores him, turns in a slow silent circle around the room; John follows his gaze.

Funny, that: there’s a hoover shoved into the corner. “What d’you think, Sherlock, he was expecting a guest, did a spot of tidying first, got caught short when the killer showed up?”

Sherlock’s survey has passed the hoover but now he spins back. “Oh! Brilliant!”

“He did? I am?”

“No no no, of course not.” He dives for the hoover, pulls the canister open, hoists the whole thing aloft: “Yes!”

Everyone in the room stares at him. “Look!” Sherlock cries. “Look at the carpet! Masses of great clomping footprints, yes, but wherever you lot haven’t trod you can see it’s been freshly hoovered.”

General gaping. Sherlock emits a huge “Ohhhhhhhhhhh. How do you bear it? How? Look!” He shakes the hoover. “No bag. There is no bag in the hoover. Therefore the diamonds were spilled in the struggle. How many are missing?”

“He checked two dozen out of inventory at his shop.” The DI, Lestrade.

“Two dozen diamonds. Strewn over a white carpet. How do you retrieve as many as possible as fast as possible? You hoover the carpet. And then you take the bag out of the canister, and off you go with your diamonds. Well, not exactly your diamonds, of course.”

So, John thinks, basically you’re looking for someone with a hoover bag full of diamonds.

“Obviously,” Sherlock tells Lestrade, as if reading John’s mind, “you’re looking for a London diamond merchant in financial trouble. If you look very quickly you’ll find him bearing traces of dust from the hoover bag on his clothes and hair, and, if you’re lucky and he has an allergy to mites, he may be sneezing as well. Of course, we can hope for blood spatter on his clothes.”

“Right,” says Lestrade. “And how, of all the diamond merchants our man here knew, which is presumably most of the high-end ones in London, do we quickly identify the one in financial trouble?”

“Check the airlines, Lestrade! The airlines! Start with Emirates, BA, Virgin.”

More silence.

“All right, Sherlock, explain all that.”

Sherlock tears at his hair. “Place not ransacked. Therefore our killer didn’t have to search the place
for the diamonds, and in any case had he found them stored away somewhere after he killed Tomasello they would not have finished by being scattered on the carpet. That must have happened during their struggle. Therefore, diamonds on view. Why? A business meeting. Improbable he’d be meeting someone in his flat to make a retail sale, not when he has, no had, you can’t still have things when you’re dead I’m given to understand, a perfectly adequate retail shop. Therefore, meeting a business colleague. The legal diamond business is intimate, done on trust, et cetera. Hence the informality of the venue. But the business colleague is in financial trouble. Well, he stole the diamonds, didn’t he?

“Now he’s got to flog them, and in a hurry, too. Where? Not Antwerp or any of the other more or less law-abiding diamond centers where he’d have to show provenance. He doesn’t want to get himself murdered, though, so it has to be somewhere with a semblance of government. Not Zimbabwe. I’d bet on Dubai; the diamond trade there is highly corruptible and also safe at the high end. As a starting point you might compare Tomasello’s contacts with the past couple of hours’ ticket sales.”

Lestrade gets on the phone to the Yard for someone to obtain passenger lists. Alas, Tomasello’s mobile is nowhere to be found, so instead of going through his contacts there’s nothing for it but to get the records of his recent calls and texts from the carrier. This goes with surprising speed; John makes a mental note to have been murdered next time he needs customer service. The numbers most recently called or texted belong to: a gem dealer, another gem dealer, the reservations desk at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, a third gem dealer, someone named Anastasia Liveright who says she’s “in public relations” and sounds thrilled to be able to go around telling people that her boyfriend has been gruesomely murdered (“Tell her to cancel the dinner reservation,” Sherlock mutters; John nearly collapses trying to stifle his laugh) and then the first gem dealer, the first gem dealer, the first gem dealer again.

His name is Max d’Orsay Wellington — “Assumed name?” John asks Sherlock; “No, what a grotesque notion; who’d concoct a name like that?”; John thinks, Says the man named Sherlock Holmes, but keeps his mouth shut — and the police, Sherlock and John naturally mingling among them, find him at home with, how cozy, a fire in the grate. Sherlock whirls back toward the foyer, seize the heavy overcoat hanging there, dumps it onto the fire, and then piles on as many couch cushions as he can grab to finish the job of smothering it. The place fills with the reek of scorched synthetics. “John, water,” Sherlock orders over the expostulations of Lestrade, d’Orsay Wellington, and the assembled multitudes, and what the hell, so John fills two enormous pasta pots he finds in the enormous kitchen; when he staggers back into the lounge, Sherlock has cleared the still-smoking textiles out of the fireplace and is stabbing at the ashes with a poker. D’Orsay Wellington is screaming about a lawsuit. John and Sherlock each empty one of the pasta pots onto the hot ash. Now there’s not only smoke but ash and filthy water everywhere. Sherlock drops to his knees, though not (John keeps feeling entirely inappropriate giggles rise up) before setting down an unused cushion to keep his trousers clean, peers into the fireplace, cries “Aha!,” sticks his left hand into the mess — “Jesus, Sherlock, that must still be hot!” — and comes up with a melted, twisted, discolored ring of beige plastic. Slight though his acquaintance with Sherlock is, John is frankly surprised that he should know what the valve on a hoover bag looks like, or for that matter even that hoover bags have valves. “I think,” Sherlock says, “that if you check the dust in the turn-ups of Mr. d’Orsay Wellington’s trousers against a sample of dust from Mr. Tomasello’s apartment, you’ll find they match nicely.” And then he gets up — John notices how well he disguises the fact that he puts more weight on his right leg than on the left — hands the bit of plastic to Lestrade, dusts off his hands dislodging almost none of the wet ash with which they are smeared, and says, “Come on, John. You’re famished, and there’s a quite good Thai place a couple of streets away.”

Behind them as they go they can hear Lestrade saying, “Right. Mr. Max d’Orsay Wellington, I am arresting you on suspicion …”
“But what about the diamonds?” John asks once they’re outside again. Did he really just go in two hops from a physiotherapy session to the arrest of a murderer?

“I expect they’re in his luggage, unless he decided to keep on being too clever and swallow them. Hm, that’s quite likely, in fact. I wonder who’ll draw the short straw at the Met.”

“Right, I was famished.”

“That’s a very poor joke, John,” Sherlock says, severely, so that now they have to stare at the pavement the rest of the way to the Thai place, because every time one of them catches even a glimpse of the other both of them burst out laughing.

But at the door, Sherlock straightens, nods abruptly, and strides off down the road. “Sherlock, wait!” John trots to catch him up. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I wasn’t planning on it, no.”

John opens his mouth, closes it again. Sherlock’s face is the one John sees during their simultaneous physiotherapy — blank and remote. “Come in the restaurant and let me have a look at your hand, at least, before you go. That ash was still hot.”

Sherlock looks at his sooty hand. “Oh. No, I’ll take care of it. If that’s all?”

“Now hold on. I’m Dr. Watson, remember? With a medical degree and everything. Come on, take a minute and save yourself a trip to the clinic and a course of antibiotics.”

Sherlock looks down at John for a long moment before turning back to the restaurant with him.

In the loo, which is thankfully clean, John scrubs his hands, then cools the water to below body temperature and soaps and rinses Sherlock’s left hand. “Really wish I had my kit, or at least exam gloves for this.” He bends close in the muted light of the loo, looking for bits of ash in the burn. “Yeah, mostly first-degree but here, at the tips of your fingers, I expect you’ll see some blistering. That’s got to hurt, Sherlock, fingertips are heavily innervated.”

“I’m aware,” Sherlock says. He hasn’t flinched. He’s watching John closely, head drawn back. John barely hears him and doesn’t look up. He gets the water a little cooler and positions Sherlock’s hand so the fingertips are in the flow. “Should have done this for you right away, at Mr. Poncy Name’s, before we left. I’m a crap doctor, I am. Let me see your other hand.”

“I didn’t have it in the fireplace.”

“Yeah, even so. … Okay then. Why don’t you stay here, keep running the cool water over the burns, that’s what you’re meant to do for first aid anyway, and I’ll go order us, I don’t know, some dumplings. Then I’ll come back and wash your right hand for you so you don’t have to use your left, and we’ll have a bite, yeah?”

The pause is long enough to make John wonder. “All right.”

John comes back to the loo holding a clean white cotton towel, a sterile packet of gauze, and a roll of surgical tape. At Sherlock’s look: “What? Restaurant kitchen, they must get burns that need care half a dozen times a week. All I had to do was ask. Okay, hold up your burned hand.” He wraps the towel around Sherlock’s palm to catch the dripping water. “Let the fingers air dry, that’ll help keep the burns cool. They’re going to hurt some under the bandaging once that’s on.”
“Do you always do this?”

“Do what?” John has warmed the water and is soaping Sherlock’s right hand.

“Keep up a stream of patter during treatment.”

“No. Only when I’ve an anxious patient,” John replies absently, rubbing at Sherlock’s knuckles. How fine-grained his skin is; John hopes those burns don’t scar. Wait, what did he just say? The little loo seems very quiet. He dares a glance at Sherlock: there’s that remote look. John’s face feels hot; he refocuses on getting the ash off Sherlock’s knuckles. “Sorry, it’s just —”

“Dumplings?” Sherlock interrupts. This is fortunate, because John has absolutely no idea what he was going to say after “Sorry, it’s just.” It’s obvious that, compared with Sherlock, he’s as thick as two short planks, but he also knows, as surely as he knows his own limp is psychosomatic, that his intuition of Sherlock’s anxiety is correct, and that Sherlock really, really doesn’t want John to have registered that anxiety; he feels as though he’s spied on someone naked.

“— Yeah, I ordered shrimp. … There, that’s both hands clean.” As delicately as he can, he pats the last traces of water off Sherlock’s burned hand, then gives him the towel to hold in his left while John bandages up the already blistering fingertips. At last it feels safe to look at Sherlock’s face again. “You know not to break the blisters, right?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

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Sherlock might not have been planning to eat, but he does manage to put the food away when it’s set in front of him. Good thing, too, because if anybody idles high and needs calories, John thinks, this is that man. “So you’re — what, a private detective?”

No, no, nothing so mundane as a private detective — a consulting detective, the only one in the world, the one the Met calls when baffled. He invented the job. Well, yes, he does take private clients as well. That would make you a private detective, then, wouldn’t it? John doesn’t say this. He’s tempted to tease Sherlock, tempted to flirt, but something is percolating in the back of his mind that comprises Sherlock’s nearly leaving him at the door of the restaurant and trying to refuse care for his burns, the hostile detective sergeant at Tomasello’s flat, and his own intuition in the loo. Sherlock is a posh and arrogant show-off, isn’t he? Nevertheless, that something in the back of John’s mind says Gently, gently.

Before they part, he makes Sherlock take his mobile number in case he has any trouble with the burns. He’s turning the key in his door at one in the morning when he realizes he left his cane in d’Orsay Wellington’s flat. And he’s not limping.

*

Sherlock’s hand hurts. It’s distracting. He’s too tired and he can feel the weakness in both legs; it’s an effort to get up the seventeen stairs to the flat. There’s an involuntary flash, himself in two years’ time, say, with forearm crutches, struggling to lower himself to the floor to look at a corpse, struggling to rise. He shuts the image down hard, shuts down the remembered sensation of lying in the dirt of a playing field with Sebastian Wilkes sneering above him. How many more years of work remain to him? And when he can’t do the work, what? Just his mind, spinning tighter and tighter. The obvious thing is to kill himself — so easy to blow out his heart, it needs only a couple of grams and Sherlock always knows where to get cocaine, he can’t help it any more than he can help knowing where his own elbow is — but he promised Sarita. “I loathe you, Sarita Banerjee,” he tries
to tell her, aloud, but finds it impossible to complete the sentence. Maybe he could explain how it was all impossible? Perhaps he could make her understand and then she would release him from that infuriating promise.

John Watson said he was a crap doctor and he is. He should have let Sherlock go home as Sherlock meant to do. He should have seen that Sherlock was exhausted and he should have known that the postpolio syndrome would be exacerbated by exhaustion. Why did he insist on bandaging Sherlock’s hand and forcing him to eat? Irrelevant that Sherlock is also not supposed to go long stretches without eating, now that he has to coddle his stupid muscle fibers. John Watson is stupid. Why did Sherlock know all evening exactly where John Watson was in space, the way he knows where to find cocaine and his elbow?

Sherlock falls asleep on the couch, still wrapped in his greatcoat, thinking in fury of stupid, slow, deliberate John Watson, how he picked crumbs of ash out of the burns on Sherlock’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

MERT = Medical Emergency Response Team. Seen a lot of violent death? Want to see some people trying to prevent more?

For John’s shoulder wound, I researched the Osprey body armor used by the UK military as well as, obviously, the anatomy of the shoulder and the treatment of bullet wounds to it. Man, does BBC Sherlock handwave that shoulder wound! The anatomy is fantastically delicate, all the nerves and blood vessels you could ask for nestled in close proximity, and it looks as if pretty much anything traveling through there and not causing Captain Watson to bleed out in minutes or permanently lose most of the function in his arm would have to, as Option B, shatter the joint, which then obviously needs rebuilding. See Shoulder and Elbow Trauma, edited by Raffi Mirzayan and John M. Itamura (2004), and fortunately searchable on Google Books.

PCA is patient-controlled analgesia. You get a control with which to deliver your own pain medication, post-surgically for example, as you need it. The usage of PCAs results in better pain control with less medication, and quicker healing.

“Birmingham” is shorthand for Queen Elizabeth’s Hospital in that city, to which UK military personnel are evacuated for treatment of the most serious and complex injuries. You would also be treated here if you were, say, Malala Yousafzai, and some Taliban cretins had shot you in the face. I think John could have had his shoulder replacement done at Bastion, but they’d probably want to free up beds and staff since he’s going to be discharged anyway.
First Light Edging Cirrus

Chapter Summary

In which John Watson learns that Sherlock Holmes has a website, a landlady, and a system of ethics. More or less.

Chapter Notes

Title from Jane Hirshfeld's poem of the same name.

As it was when love slipped inside us.
It looked out face to face in every direction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John buys all the papers the next day; he can’t resist, and of course Tomasello’s murder has made every one, what with the diamonds, the gore, and the image of d'Orsay Wellington hoovering the carpet around the corpse of the man he’d just killed. The Mail as usual trumps all: “To Do List: 1. Commit Bloody Murder. 2. Hoover.” Sherlock’s unnamed, though that weary-looking DI Lestrade credits an “anonymous source familiar with the diamond trade” for his help in narrowing the field of suspects. What a night, John thinks wistfully. But apart from manhandling a couple of pasta pots, he doesn’t suppose he was much use; Sherlock’s not likely to invite him another time.

After work, he finds Sherlock’s website, The Science of Deduction, and spends the evening absorbed in it. The site’s as much an encyclopedia as anything else, with exhaustive (exhausting) articles on, among other things, types of ash, variations in microclimate at a hundred and twenty different London locations, telltale signs that someone is richer or poorer than he’s trying to appear, and the marks that dozens of chronic conditions leave on the body. John is impressed to see that that last catalogue is at least as complete and accurate as he himself could produce — except, he realizes just as he’s x-ing out, there’s no entry for postpolio syndrome.

* 

The Tomasello case was Tuesday; Sherlock’s next physiotherapy is Friday. John’s, too. But John, who has always been prompt, isn’t there. Sherlock reminds himself that this is both expectable and desirable, that John isn’t especially clever or … or interesting. His absence is no more than a return to the status quo. Undoubtedly it was a blow to the man’s ego to experience the workings of Sherlock’s intelligence, and although Watson was certainly more polite about it than most, the good doctor (Sherlock puts plenty of internal sneering into this phrase) would of course prefer to associate with people like himself, who —

John is sitting on the bench near the main doors, wearing his street clothes. At Sherlock’s approach he gets to his feet. “There you are. I was just going to poke my head into the exercise room to make sure I hadn’t missed you.”

The first thing Sherlock thinks of to say is “You didn’t come to your appointment,” which is so
moronic that the gears grind in his head, but holding it back makes room for the next thing, which he does actually say, and it’s even worse: “You missed your appointment, but you came to see me.”

“Excellent deduction. One of the other doctors called in sick, so the rest of us had to cover his patients and no physio for me today. But I wanted a look at your burns.”

Sherlock extends his hand. He took the dressing off this morning and the fingertips are exquisitely tender.

“Why didn’t you rebandage these? Good thing I brought my kit.”

“It didn’t seem necessary.”

John rolls not just his eyes but his entire head. “No, why would it, with blisters all over. Don’t you need your hands for your work, then?”

“I’ll stop by Boots on the way home.”

“You could have stopped on the way here, too, but you didn’t.”

“I don’t need a personal physician.”

“Fine, you idiot, but you need your damn fingers cleaned and rebandaged, and I’m here, so let me do what I have been expensively trained to do.”

People are afraid of Sherlock. Many are afraid enough to hate him. Lestrade shows him the general patient acceptance that he shows everyone, besides which Sherlock is useful; Mrs. Hudson is fond of him and sometimes chides him in a desultory way for his untidiness; Sarita would definitely shout at Sherlock if she thought he was neglecting himself, but Sarita is in New York City. John Watson is right here in London, in fact he is up in Sherlock’s face with his voice raised, as if Sherlock were any other person who had exasperated him. Sherlock pulls his chin in and his neck back until he resembles a very pale turtle.

John Watson bursts out laughing and descends off his toes. “Um, I’m told I have a temper,” he tells Sherlock’s shirt buttons. “Sorry?”

“Do you always go about like this, clinging to the sole idea in your head as to a life preserver?”

“Do you always insult medical personnel as they attempt to treat your carelessly self-inflicted injuries?”

“You could come by my flat after you’re done with your patients,” Sherlock hears himself say. “A pleasant walk, now you don’t need your cane anymore. Lestrade sent over some cold case files. Might expand your narrow horizons. I say ‘might.’”

“That’s the most offensively phrased offer I’ve had since the last invitation I got from you. Of course, I accept. Where — ?”

“Two twenty-one B Baker Street.” Aha, the distraction has succeeded.

“I’ll come straight from work. And, Sherlock: Don’t change the subject. I’m cleaning and bandaging those fingers now.”

*

Far in the distance, the smallest and faintest sound, as if the earth were shifting; between the twin
gates of the fortress, the slenderest thread of light.

* 

John gets to Baker Street a little before eight, feeling rather as if one of the cool kids in school had asked his opinion of a band and then turned to his cohorts to say, “See? Told you lot Watson knew what he was talking about.” In the no-prizes-for-this intuition that it will not occur to Sherlock to lay in any supper, he’s brought Indian takeaway, guessing at what Sherlock might like (Does anyone not love samosas and tandoori chicken? Well, vegetarians, but he already knows Sherlock isn’t one), which he nearly loses to a full-body crash against an almost elderly woman who’s on her way out just as he rings the bell labeled B. “Oh! You did surprise me. I’m Sherlock’s landlady. You must be that Dr. Watson he’s been going on about,” she says. What? This is only the first of several occasions on which John will be taken aback in the next couple of hours. The second follows close upon the first, as the landlady takes hold of his upper arm — her grip is quite surprisingly strong — and delivers gimlet-eyed notice: “That Sherlock’s a good boy, Dr. Watson, and I won’t have him trifled with.”

“I — what — no — I definitely don’t plan to trifle with him — I’m only bringing him dinner,” John concludes feebly. He raises the carrier bag.

“Well, that’s a start. Heaven knows he could do with some feeding up. You have a pleasant evening, now.”

Struck mute, John watches her go. He turns back to the door but before he has a chance to reach for the bell again he hears Sherlock overhead. “Oh good, you remembered to bring supper. And you didn’t go to that place on York Street, their chapatis are terrible.” The man himself is hanging half out the window.

“I — no, this is from a takeaway near the clinic. Very good chapatis. But, er, I didn’t actually bring any chapatis. Just naan.” From the depths of secondary school, a phrase floats up to John: O speak again, bright angel … Sherlock’s hair is tousled. His skin is lambent in the twilight. You’re lovely, John doesn’t say, how have I not noticed it, all this time? His heart rises.

“Never mind, you’ll do better next time,” Sherlock says kindly, and withdraws from the window. After an interval almost long enough for John to collect himself, the street door opens and the effort is undone: Sherlock isn’t wearing the remote look he wears in physio, nor the secret and shielded look John caught a glimpse of while he dressed Sherlock’s hand in the loo. Nor is this his avid, deducing expression. He looks … glad.

Fortunately, the flat offers plenty of distraction. John’s first impression is that it’s a tip, but he takes this back at once. There are books piled everywhere, and technical journals splayed open on the coffee table, on the arms of chairs, on the floor around any spot where a person might sit; overlaying all that, dozens of manila folders with sticky notes poking out. The kitchen has been repurposed as a laboratory, to judge by the rows of test tubes and the stacked petri dishes. It’s all a mess, but one thing it’s not, on closer inspection, is dirty, and also John has an inkling that inside Sherlock’s head is an index to the location and content of every item. He holds up the carrier bag. “Where?”

“Oh. Left-hand side of the coffee table, left-hand as you face the couch that is, I’ve solved that one, you can get all the samosa grease on it you like.” John can’t bring himself to use crime scene photos that gruesome as coasters, so he reassembles the file and closes the folder first.

“Plates?”

“Really, John, must I tell you everything?” Sherlock is scanning the floor around the fireplace.
“Was that an answer, or just your default reply to any utterance with a rising inflection?” John asks.

“There, I knew that one hadn’t been solved,” Sherlock says under his breath, snatching up a file. So, all right, he doesn’t know off the top of his head where every item is.

John rummages through the kitchen cabinets, ruminating mildly on the question of why Sherlock’s fantastic and constant offensiveness doesn’t seem to offend him. He doesn’t come up with an answer, because he is steering clear of what he felt when he looked up at Sherlock in the window, but he does come up with two plates. He finds silverware as well, and most of a package of paper napkins.

“Not that silverware, John,” says Sherlock, without looking up from the file, “I was using it for something. No, put it in the sink, I’ll autoclave it later. Try the drawer on the other side of the refrigerator, that should be safe.”

“You have an autoclave?”

“Of course.”

John raises an eyebrow.

“For heaven’s sake, John, you’re a doctor, do you think the cadavers decay all by themselves?”

Right.

Having assembled dinner and the tools with which to eat it (maybe go with the plastic utensils in the takeaway bag? oh, plastic forks just break in the middle of the meal anyway; what the hell, they can live dangerously), John sits himself on the couch. “Sherlock, are you having supper, then?”

Silence. The man looks entranced — quite literally: he’s holding a photograph in his bandaged hand, meanwhile tapping his lips with the fore and middle fingers of his right hand, and he’s rocking, or more properly swaying, from his ankles up, rather like a tall building as it yields to high wind. After a moment’s thought, John goes and stands in front of him. “Sherlock.”

No response. All right, now to alert Sherlock to the availability of food without startling him. With thumb and forefinger John takes hold of the free edge of the photograph and curls it behind itself. Sherlock cranes his neck to follow the image as it recedes; then he comes to himself and his eyes widen. John has started to notice that he quite likes the feeling he gets when he arrests Sherlock’s attention. “Supper,” he says. “Thought you might want to eat some of it. Bring your friend.” He gives his edge of the photograph a significant wiggle.

The wide-eyed look is immediately followed by the narrow-eyed look, the one that means “How is it possible you have done something I wasn’t expecting; wait here a moment while I fetch my magnifying glass and sampling kit.” John likes that one too. “Chicken tandoori,” he tells it. “And samosas. On the coffee table. In front of the couch.”

“I never eat while I’m working on a case,” Sherlock says.

“What, food impedes the workings of your brain? Don’t talk rubbish; they make us study physiology in medical school, you know. Come and eat, or I’ll explain to you all about how the brain has the biggest caloric requirements of any organ in the body.”

“Organs not in the body generally have no caloric requirements whatever,” Sherlock says with a sniff. He somehow manages to retain a put-upon air while eating more than half the tandoori and all but one of the samosas, though he does leave the naan.
“Are you seeing anyone?” John asks near the end of dinner, around a precious bite of samosa. He has a dim idea that talking with his mouth full will make the question seem casual. Also, Sherlock doesn’t happen to be looking at him, and that feels safer somehow.

Sherlock goes still, and where a moment ago he only happened to be looking in another direction, now he is clearly and deliberately looking away from John. “I don’t date,” he says, stiffly.

“Oh. Sorry, didn’t mean—"

Sherlock continues: “I’m flattered by your interest, but I consider myself married to my work”—mechanical, priggish, rehearsed. He sounds so unlike himself that John can’t immediately make sense of the words.

Finally John manages, “Pass me the tandoori, will you?,” and that must be the right tack, because Sherlock is soon brandishing photographs at him and exclaiming over the deficiencies of the Met.

* 

Unless one of the other doctors is out, John finishes work before physiotherapy. Now he and Sherlock fall into a habit. Sherlock waits outside the clinic (never in the changing room) while John gets back into street clothes, and then they head for Baker Street, deciding on takeaway as they go. There ensues some version of the following: Sherlock, having begun by vociferously disdaining any notion of supper, ends, once John has suggested Thai or Chinese or Indian or Italian …, by insisting that only one particular restaurant of whatever sort John has suggested will do, and furthermore by specifying the dishes that, in his view, are the only ones worth eating. John points out that, as John will be the one eating the dish John chooses, Sherlock only gets to pick his own meals; Sherlock points out that he prefers to sample more than one dish, and therefore John should order something that he, Sherlock, likes to eat. John suggests that in that case Sherlock should also consider John’s tastes in choosing what he, Sherlock, orders; Sherlock counters that John as a rule eats only what he himself has ordered, so it’s no concern of his, John’s, what Sherlock orders, when he, John, won’t be eating it anyway. John calls Sherlock a great wanker. Sherlock smirks into his muffler and informs John that only persons with inadequate minds resort to insult in argument. John points out that Sherlock has just done exactly that. Sherlock says, “Yes, but my insult was much better worded.”

Thus they arrive at Baker Street still quarreling.

Usually Mrs. Hudson pokes her head out to say hello to Sherlock and “Lovely to see you again, Dr. Watson.”

“Your landlady’s mad for you,” John observes one evening, as he unpacks their food.

“Mmm … I was in Florida at the same time as she,” Sherlock says, vaguely.

John raises an eyebrow. “Yet not all the people who were in Florida at the same time as you have become your adoring landlady.”

“Very perceptive, John. Mr. Hudson was on death row.”

“You prevented his execution?”

“Oh no, I made sure of it.”

story about some poor fucker lighting on fire during his electrocution? Yes, there was. “What … ?”

Sherlock exhales impatiently. “She was my landlady there too. He used to beat her. That wouldn’t get him executed, of course, even in Florida where they’re quite enthusiastic about the death penalty. For him to get so much as significant jail time would have been an extraordinary result, and then once he was out he could have hunted her down and beaten her a bit more, but fortunately he made a hobby of killing prostitutes as well, and I was able to use that to get him out of the picture.”

“Sherlock: ‘fortunately’?”

“I don’t argue it was fortunate for the prostitutes, of course. It was fortunate for Mrs. Hudson, though; otherwise she might not be rid of him yet.”

John rubs his forehead.

“You don’t approve.”

“They weren’t a means to an end, Sherlock, they were people.”

“Oh, spare me. I didn’t kill them, Stanley Hudson did. That was the existing fact. I employed it to a worthy end, as far as I understand these things. In addition to which, thanks to my efforts, he was prevented from killing any additional prostitutes. Now here you are bemoaning their fate. Why? Once he had killed them, no further harm could come to them. Typical. When prostitutes are killed, there is weeping and wailing and beating of breasts. Yet I don’t notice any excess of social concern for their safety or their wages or their working conditions whilst they’re alive.”

Jesus, the sharp end of Sherlock’s intellectual contempt is very different from his absent disparagement of everybody and anybody’s brains. And … and if John’s honest, he has to admit the justice of what Sherlock says. Yes, the world is generally oblivious at best to the welfare of live people who sell sex. Yes, the world generally takes an interest only when said people have become spectacularly dead — if then. Yes, Sherlock’s detective skills protected Mrs. Hudson and probably an unknown number of other women as well. However.

“Okay. I— It’s not the most soothing ethical analysis I’ve ever heard, but I can’t fault it. Only, Sherlock? It still wasn’t ‘fortunate,’ him killing them.”

Sherlock looks at the floor, deflating a little. “As a lever,” he says, softly.

“Yeah. Except it’s never just a lever.”

Sherlock shrugs — wants to resist this, John can see. Which is odd, too, because that business of pious concern for the dead had made him genuinely angry; it follows, then, that whatever Sherlock affects, he feels something for the living. John’s own anger is gone, leaving behind it a confused, achy affection. They’re poised like this, and John is trying to think of what to say next, when Sherlock gets a text.

He replies immediately, emitting a pleased noise, then leaps up and throws on his coat. “Lestrade. He’s got an unidentified body, fished out of the Thames stark naked with no obvious sign of violence. Doubt it’ll turn out to be of much interest, but still, something to do on a dull evening.”

“Hey!”

“What? Hurry up, John, at the rate you’re moving the dead will rise before we get there, and then what will we do to pass the time?”
Yes, all right, that’s it for the evening debate over ethics; John grabs his coat and clatters after Sherlock down the stairs.

“Don’t wait up, Mrs. Hudson!” Sherlock shouts.

“I’m your landlady, dear, not your mother superior,” John hears. Sherlock’s already hailing a cab.

*

At the morgue they are met by a pretty, stammering pathologist who introduces herself as Molly Hooper. Sherlock barely glances at her but points himself at the autopsy room like a compass needle. Dr. Hooper, for her part, can’t take her eyes off Sherlock — though, John notices, stifling his jealousy (oh, shit), that doesn’t make her remarks on the corpse any less detailed or competent sounding. She hasn’t properly got going on the autopsy yet.

Lestrade, leaning against the wall, looks surprised to see John, but nods sociably at him. Some other familiar faces, too, notably the detective sergeant — Donovan, that was it — who’d had words with Sherlock at the Tomasello scene, and that po-faced SOCO, Anderson. Donovan makes a face at the floor when she spots Sherlock. Anderson opens her mouth, then shuts it again at a look from Lestrade. Familiar is not always good. Better is the unfamiliar PC trying to study Sherlock inconspicuously and failing to conceal her terrified, thrilled anticipation; she must have heard a thing or two about the consulting detective and his little ways. Sherlock casts a glance at her but seems to conclude it’s too much trouble to shatter her nerves just now.

“One of the overnight guards at Cringle Dock spotted the body lodged against a barge,” Lestrade tells Sherlock. What a place to fetch up, John thinks: a waste transfer station. Sherlock makes a noncommittal noise, gloves up, and goes directly for the dead man’s mouth. He opens it, inspects the teeth, counts them top and bottom, tapping each one as he goes, closes the jaw, mutters unintelligibly. Then he picks up a hand, inspects the nails and the skin of the fingertips. “Give me a comb,” he demands of the air.

Lestrade gives Anderson another quelling look when Anderson’s lip starts to curl. The PC has given up trying to be inconspicuous and is going with “frankly enthralled.” John’s with her a hundred percent.

Dr. Hooper has been rummaging in a drawer and now comes up with a rattail comb, half its teeth missing. “Here you go, Sherlock! I knew we had one somewhere!”

Sherlock seizes the comb; Dr. Hooper retreats, biting her lip. “No, help me sit him up.” Together she and Sherlock lift the body into a sitting position and Sherlock runs the comb through the dead man’s hair, looking thoughtful and muttering to himself. “No, no, here, yes, he’s worn it this way a good while, along the natural part, very careful work with the scissors and straight razor.” He aims the comb toward Dr. Hooper, who somehow manages to take it while still helping to hold up the body.

“John, get my magnifier out of my pocket— No, the inside jacket pocket.” Really, Sherlock? Yes, apparently so. Sherlock scrutinizes the tips of the man’s hairs and sends John pocket-fishing again, for a penlight because now it’s the ear canals’ turn. Then he lets go the body; Dr. Hooper seems to have been prepared for this eventuality, because she doesn’t stagger under the sudden weight, but lowers it gently before dropping the comb into a jar of antiseptic. John awards points: it’s a job of work to keep your wits about you when you suffer from a stammering crush on an unavailable beauty. Well, Watson, you should know.

“John, what do you make of this?” Sherlock has aimed the penlight at a patch of skin at the juncture of neck and shoulder.
John peers at it, reaching for the penlight. “Hand me that, would you? I want to get raking light.”

Yes, something’s there: a puncture, barely visible but for the slightest tearing of the skin at one edge. “Looks like an injection site. Fine-gauge needle, like what you’d use for insulin.”

“But a diabetic wouldn’t inject himself in the neck.”

“No, he’d use a spot he could see. Somebody shooting up heroin or cocaine” — Sherlock blinks, and John hears a snort that can only come from Anderson; he sets aside revelation and homicidal impulse alike — “might go for the neck after he ran out of arms and legs and pretty much everything else, but this bloke hasn’t got tracks. So, right, another person probably did this to him.”

“He tried to jerk his neck away.”

“Because the needle tore the skin? Yeah, okay.” John thinks out loud: “Say you want to kill someone via injection, or disable them. There are the usual suspects — heroin, ah, coke. Otherwise, depends on what you have access to, I guess. Insulin. Fentanyl, or another of the analgesic opioids. Or a paralytic. Tubocurarine, say.” He stops short. “Sorry, Dr. Hooper. Trespassing on your patch.”

“Molly’s rather competent, actually,” says Sherlock, without looking up. “She’d have spotted the puncture sooner or later.” The pathologist blushes; “Sherlock’s notion of a compliment,” John says to her, under his breath, earning a smile from her and a narrow glare from the giver of the compliment. John grins back at him, sunny, and huffy Sherlock returns his attention to the corpse. A moment in contemplation of its pubes, a cursory inspection of its toes, and off come the gloves. John judges the elapsed time since Sherlock put them on to be four and a half minutes.

“I was quite enjoying my vindaloo, Lestrade, I don’t see why you needed me.”

“You eat?” Lestrade says. He glances at John, abruptly speculative, then returns his attention to Sherlock. “Obviously I did need you, Sherlock; I don’t call you out because of my secret desire to be humiliated.” John bites his lip against a smile — of course, this whole exchange is a ritual between them. Lestrade texts, Sherlock sweeps in, Sherlock deduces, Sherlock complains and belittles, Lestrade justifies, and Sherlock, exactly as put upon as he is while articulating to John his requirements for their entirely unneeded supper, expounds:

“If I must. He’s in his mid to late fifties and his teeth are too big for his jaw, but they’re straight and even, and four are missing, two up two down. And he’s circumcised. The genital modification might of course indicate a Jew or a Muslim of any nationality, but in combination with orthodontia in a man his age makes him almost certainly American, at least by origin. He has had a manicure and, what’s more unusual for a man, a pedicure, within the past day, two at most. His very good haircut is likewise fresh, as we can see because the ends of his hairs are sharp and a few stray clippings are still lodged in his ear canals despite his recent immersion. Last, his pubic hair is neatly trimmed, though not depilated. As a starting point I should look for an American guest missing from a luxury hotel that has a spa catering for men. The Connaught? The Mayfair? Maybe the Athenaeum. The careful grooming and in particular the attention to his pubic hair suggest he was gay, which should help narrow the field. Though they are by no means definitive — look at our unimpeachably heterosexual Anderson, for example, he’s obviously had a go at beautification, to judge by the way he’s been struggling not to rub his balls this while. All aesthetic striving is futile in his case, of course, and the hair must be driving him mad as it grows in.” There is a sputtering from next to Lestrade. John presses a hand against his mouth. Take that, you bastard. The poor PC is biting her lips so hard they must be bleeding.

“Sherlock, knock it off,” says Lestrade, poker-faced.

“Why, am I wrong? Ask Sergeant Donovan. In any event, since our man here probably had his hair
cut at this same spa, and since the style is habitual to him, odds are he’s a regular client.

“Now, the killers. Plural. A man would have to be extraordinarily powerful to restrain our victim with one hand while preparing and giving an injection with the other. Then the dead or dying man’s stripped down and dragged or tossed into the water. Hard work, and premeditated, because people don’t as a rule go about with syringes and a supply of disabling chemicals. An exception applies if one of the killers was diabetic, in which case the killing may have been spur of the moment.” Sherlock hesitates briefly, frowns, then:

“Of the minimum two assailants, at least one knew the dead man and has an obvious motive for murder: hence the attempt to delay identification by stripping him. Wait, why didn’t he sink? Oh, yes. A motorized vessel passes almost immediately after he enters the water, and the wake bangs him into a barge moored at Cringle Dock. Correct?”

Lestrade inclines his head. “Where the guard spotted him.”

“So he would have gone in quite near Cringle Dock. Unless the killers had access to the transfer station, unlikely given the guard’s sharp eyes” — heavens, another compliment! — “I expect you’ll find the clothes in a rubbish bin at the east end of Battersea Park. They’ll have kept his wallet, of course, and anything else that would lead directly to his name. That’s all, I think.”

John breaks the Sherlock-induced silence: “That was beautiful.” The architecture of Sherlock’s reasoning soars in his mind’s eye, gleaming, elegant. He has a moment of giddy discomfort — did he just use the word “beautiful”? Yes, dammit, he did, because Sherlock’s mind is the most splendid and wildest thing he has ever in his life seen. Settling this with himself almost reconciles him to the fact that Dr. Molly Hooper wears the same look of dazed admiration that must be on his own face.

Sherlock turns just his head toward John. “You know you say those things out loud?”

John squashes down a spike of embarrassment. “Sorry. I’ll, ah, try to keep a lid on it.”

“No, no, it’s—it’s fine.” Has someone pressed Sherlock’s Pause button? A beat, two beats, and he’s still looking at John. Puzzled? Can he be puzzled? If John weren’t transfixed he would miss the instant: Sherlock’s face softening, the corners of his mouth rising so minutely you couldn’t even call the expression tentative. Also, in that same instant, a sensation as of a cord between them. Gossamer, unbreakable. When Sherlock looks away, John becomes aware that no one else in the room has missed the moment either. Molly Hooper is blushing. Well, he doesn’t have many friends, you idiot. It’s bound to feel significant that he likes you.

Lestrade clears his throat. “Thanks, Sherlock, that’s given us a good bit to go on with. Enjoy the rest of your supper, yeah?” And he gives John another of those interrogative looks.

* *

Sherlock hails a cab on Giltspur. “Baker Street.”

John climbs in after him. “But drop me anywhere along the Central Line first, please.” Sherlock hm’s at this but seems distracted, communing with his phone and biting his lips. It’s something of a wrench, actually, after that … moment, at Barts — not that John knows what, if anything, he hoped might follow from it. To keep from watching Sherlock, he leans back and shuts his eyes. It’s been a long day anyhow; just as well to go home.

“Holborn do for you, sir?”

“Thanks, yeah. —G’night, Sherlock, see you next week?”
Sherlock hums again but doesn’t look up. *I must’ve imagined it. Get over yourself, Watson, this is ridiculous.*

John’s halfway down the stairs to the platform when someone grabs him from behind and spins him around, nearly sending them both the rest of the way. “John, where are you going? We have a killer to catch! Two killers!”

“What?” His heart is still hammering: he was that close to punching his “assailant’s” lights out.

“Battishill Street, John! Come on, there’s no time to explain, the cab is waiting.”

John plunges up the stairs in Sherlock’s wake and throws himself, breathless, into the same cab he just left. “Sherlock, why are we going to Battishill Street? Where is Battishill Street, come to that?”

“Islington. We’re going to see Marisa Westen.”

“Marisa Westen. And this would be …?”

“Stuart Goldensohn’s killer. Well, one of them.”

“Gold- The victim? Sherlock, how do you know his name?”

Sherlock heaves a great, disgruntled, triumphant sigh. “Really, John, I can’t be held responsible for your failure to read the *Telegraph*.”

John counts to ten. All right, he gets as far as five. “Spill, you git.”

“Stuart Goldensohn is, or was, an American lawyer, partner in Straub and Childers. Boston firm. They formerly employed as an associate attorney a woman named Marisa Westen, but fired her for incompetence. Ms. Westen made her way here, applied to the Inns of Court, and was accepted. Sadly, she is no more able a London barrister than she was a Boston lawyer, and it soon became apparent that the facts of her life were not in accord with the representations made in her vitae. Nor had Mr. Goldensohn written for her the effusive letter of reference that she attributed to him. Disbarment proceedings are now in train, and a criminal trial for fraud is in view. Goldensohn arrived the day before yesterday to testify in the first of these proceedings and no doubt would have been called to the second, as well. It’s been in all the papers, John, I don’t know how anyone could miss it.”

“Blimey. And from this, we get to the body at Barts — how?”

“The proceedings against Ms. Westen were delayed because she had an episode of diabetic ketoacidosis, John!”

“And the victim might have been injected with insulin. I dunno, Sherlock, seems like a stretch.”

“You think so? Look at this.” Sherlock shows John his phone, featuring the results of a Google Image search. The face of Stuart Goldensohn is, allowing for the changes imposed by death and the Thames, that of the corpse on Molly Hooper’s autopsy table. The insiders of John’s head seem to be flying around the roof of the cab. He hangs on to the life preserver of “How the hell …?”; “How the hell did you get Marisa Westen’s address, then? And how do you know she’s home?”

“British Telecom owes me a favor. And I don’t know that she’s home, but it’s as good a starting point as any.”

“What, the whole bloody firm owes you a favor?”
“Well, no, not exactly the whole firm. A department that has access to account holders’ data. Well, someone in the department, that is. Who has access to data.”

“Sherlock! That is completely illegal!”

“Isn’t murder?” Sherlock asks demurely.

John throws up his hands. “Just tell me you’ve informed Lestrade where we’re going.”

“Of course I have!” Sherlock proclaims, and sends a text. *Oh, God.*

“When did you work all this out, anyway? Wait, you hesitated for a second back at Barts, when you were telling us about the body.” Sherlock purses his lips. *Ha, Mr. Consulting Detective, other people notice things sometimes too.* “Don’t tell me you knew already and didn’t tell Lestrade, Sherlock, that’s just not on.”

“Oh! The police. I can’t help it if they never see the implications of data that’s directly in front of them, John.”

“Sherlock — ”

“Anyway, it’s immaterial. I knew there was something about insulin, but I only remembered Westen being a diabetic when we were getting in the cab. After that, the rest of it was obvious.”

“Obvious, yeah.”

*John’s tone is confusing.*

Sherlock shoots him a look and finds … he finds John marveling and affectionate. Exasperated with Sherlock, too. And chagrined at what he sees as his own slow-wittedness. Sherlock chooses this last to answer: “You needn’t disparage yourself, John, you’re not nearly as stupid as most people.”

John bursts out laughing. “You don’t hear yourself at all, do you?” How warm his voice is. Sherlock narrows his eyes, which only makes John laugh harder. Sherlock is annoyed to discover that he is not sure why John is laughing. In the past, when he has not understood the reasons for someone’s laughter, the laughter has seemed to function as a border between him and the person laughing; Sherlock could almost fancy this border moving outward, invisible but unbreachable, pushing him farther away. John’s laugh, though, seems to enfold Sherlock, as if to draw him in. It is strange. It is pleasant, which also makes it disconcerting. Sherlock sets this aside to think about later: they are nearly at Battishill Street.

Here he goes nearly mad with frustration when John makes him wait for Lestrade’s team. Though perhaps, Sherlock grudgingly concedes, it’s just as well, because not only is Westen home but so is her hypertrophied boyfriend. When the police arrive, there is a brief but impressive struggle; after the portion of it that takes place in the kitchen, Sherlock decides to see about acquiring a stab vest, though it wouldn’t be practical to wear one over his suit.

Like most people who lie on official application forms and falsify their résumés, Marisa Westen is cunning but lacks foresight, and the boyfriend is of very low wattage indeed. The circumstances of the murder, as elicited from the surviving principals, illustrate this well. When they ran across Goldensohn in Battersea Park, words (“Or,” Sherlock says, “in the boyfriend’s case, grunts”) were had, escalating to shoves and culminating in the boyfriend’s holding Goldensohn down while Westen shoved the insulin into his neck. Had they then called 999, they might have been looking at
charges of assault, but inevitably they panicked (“Idiots”), stripped Goldensohn, and shoved him into the river, where he drowned.

*  

At their next dinner, Sherlock reveals, in some indignation, that he was wrong about Goldensohn’s clothes. Only the shoes, socks, and underwear turn up in a rubbish bin. Westen’s boyfriend has a thrifty streak and had secreted the other garments in a couple of Tesco’s carrier bags under the kitchen sink, with a view to dry-cleaning them and then offering them to a high-end consignment shop once the publicity over the murder died down.

“It was probably a very good suit,” says John, consolingly.

Then he takes a deep breath, because it’s been on his mind, and there’s no time like the present: “Sherlock. In the autopsy room with Goldensohn. I mentioned cocaine—”

“You saw me react, and now you want to know whether I occupy my free time injecting my—”

“No. Will you shut up and hear me out?”

Sherlock shuts up. His face is stony.

“I admit I considered the possibility. People miss the signs in their family and friends, so I sat myself down with a checklist—yes, all right, you can scoff—and I applied it to you as objectively as I could.”

“And what did your objective examination reveal?” Sherlock starts undoing his shirt cuff.

“My objective examination revealed that you’re a great pillock who won’t stop talking. This is not the point, Sherlock, and leave your bloody shirt alone, I don’t believe you’re shooting up cocaine and I don’t need to see your arms. Stop.”

Sherlock stops, but he won’t look at John.

“I didn’t like seeing Anderson poke you with a stick, especially not with a stick I gave him. I’m sorry. That was all I wanted to say, really.”

It would be brilliant, John thinks dimly through his rage, to see Sherlock gobsmacked by something other than the experience of having someone take his part.

“I stopped using nearly eleven years ago,” Sherlock says, eventually. “In New York. I stayed with my … my old caretaker. She’s a professor of chemistry now, appropriately enough. But. In London, before that. I was arrested. Well, several times. Anderson was present for a couple of those occasions. He doesn’t like me to forget it. So.”

How good, John thinks dimly through his rage, that Anderson isn’t here, because John would have to pound him into the floor. Although—

“Sherlock. How did you guess Anderson had had his balls waxed? And not that he didn’t have, say, crabs?”

The air is immediately buoyant. Sherlock gives John a sidelong glance, amused. “I never guess.”

“Never.”

“No, John, I stick to observable facts. It’s wonderful what can be revealed in a browser history.”
One Monday, John’s working after clinic hours, catching up on patient notes. The place is dead quiet and besides, the door’s locked, so it’s disconcerting to have his office door bang open and two dark-suited official ninja bodyguard types slide in. John gets to his feet, though he knows he’s not going anywhere: the suit-ninjas are between him and the door, besides which there’s a long corridor to the exit, besides which there are two of them and one of him, and on top of everything his shoulder is a misery tonight. If you can’t fight, you may as well be dignified, he figures, so he assumes parade rest. The ninjas have a good look round — it’s vaguely reassuring, John supposes, that they don’t head for either the stack of records he’s working on or his supply of hypodermics; on the other hand, medications of potential illicit interest aren’t stored in individual doctors’ exam rooms anyway — and then one of them says, “Wait here.” “What else was I going to do?” John asks their backs as the ninjas leave; from the hall, he hears an “All right, sir, you can go on in; we’ll be just outside if he gives any trouble,” and there enters a man who is really rather … ridiculous. Who carries those huge umbrellas anymore? And who, for God’s sake, uses an umbrella as a walking-stick?

“Dr. Watson.” A genial smile with no apparent affect behind it whatever.

“Shouldn’t that be ‘Dr. Watson, I presume’?”

“I congratulate you on your knowledge of British colonial folklore, Doctor. Tell me, what is the nature of your relationship with Sherlock Holmes?”

John blinks. “I don’t see that that’s any of your business. And who, by the way, are you?”

“I’m someone who’s concerned for him.”

“And, what, your way of showing concern is to break into a clinic after hours with a pair of thugs and try to intimidate the staff?”

Umbrella Man sighs and arranges his face into a patient expression. “I see that I have not succeeded.”

John’s gathering steam now. “Well no, not really. If you wanted to intimidate me, you should have had the thugs rough me up first, or, well, I don’t know. As it is, I’ve got a man with a big umbrella standing in my office and acting mysterious for no reason I can see. You must be watching Sherlock, or you wouldn’t know that we know each other in the first place. And if you have the resources to watch him, and you’re so bloody concerned for him, then why can’t you fucking well ask him about the nature of our relationship?”

At this last, the man’s scrutiny of John falters for an instant; John almost misses it. The face smooths over, then: “But I choose to ask you. You are surely well aware by now that Sherlock Holmes is not always the best judge of his own welfare.”

“What makes you think I am?”

Sharply: “I don’t. And because Sherlock Holmes is such a poor caretaker of himself, I monitor his contacts. In particular his intimate contacts, Doctor.”

“That’s. Unbelievably intrusive, is what that is. And if I’m Sherlock’s friend, which we’ve established you know I am, then you also know the only way for me to answer, as his friend, is to tell you to bugger off. So: Bugger off.”

Umbrella Man gazes at John dispassionately through this, and he doesn’t immediately speak. His
thoughtful, searching look suddenly strikes John as familiar; the words “Hang on, you’re related to him somehow” are on his lips when Umbrella Man gives a small smile and a head tilt. “There’s nothing indirect about you, is there, Dr. Watson? Thank you; this has been a most enlightening conversation. Good night.” And he turns and leaves.

Is that it?

From the end of the hall, John watches Umbrella Man, followed by the ninjas, walk out the clinic’s front door. Umbrella Man checks to make sure the door is locked behind him, spots John standing dumbfounded outside his office, gives a surprisingly ... sad? nod, and is gone.

* 

JW to SH: everything ok where you are?

SH to JW: Yes. SH

SH to JW: Thank you. SH

JW to SH: good. don’t know how to say this exactly but i think you’ve got a stalker.

Several minutes pass, long enough for John to wonder whether the suggestion has somehow offended Sherlock.

SH to JW: You needn’t concern yourself. SH

JW to SH: he showed up at the clinic. not a threat, then?

SH to JW: Did he threaten you? SH

JW to SH: no overt threat, just had 2 ninja types w/ him. sort of advance men.

JW to SH: not even looming. bit absurd really.

JW to SH: you know who he is?

SH to JW: Obviously. SH

Obviously. John shakes his head. So he was right: Umbrella Man is a relative of Sherlock’s. They have superciliousness in common, anyway.

JW to SH: care to share the information?

SH to JW: No. SH

Well, if that isn’t a door slamming shut. John thinks about this for a while.

JW to SH: ok

JW to SH: see you at physio tomorrow, then?

Another long pause.

SH to JW: Yes. SH

SH to JW: Thank you for your concern. SH
John feels a pang when he reads that last. Stiff-as-a-board Sherlock: is it really so strange that John should be looking out for him? Apparently so. John thinks this over as he tidies away the last of the patient charts and lets himself out; chews at it as he walks to the tube. In the end, with some misgivings, he keeps his word and doesn’t press Sherlock to explain.

*  

One evening, John makes Sherlock watch the Reliant Robin episode of *Top Gear*. Jeremy Clarkson, driving, makes a turn, and the Reliant goes over on its side. Jeremy Clarkson makes a turn, and the Reliant goes over on its side. Jeremy Clarkson makes a turn, and the Reliant—

Sherlock explodes. “Why does he persist in doing that? It’s obvious that with a single wheel at the front, the vehicle is unstable, he knew that perfectly well before he got in or he wouldn’t have made such a show of the crash helmet and the four-point restraints—”

“Sherlock—”

“Even if all he did was to set a counterweight on the passenger side, it would improve—”

“Sherlock—”

“And he can’t possibly be tipping the car just when someone he knows is walking past, it’s all a fraud, set up in advance—”

“Sherlock!”

“What?”

“He’s doing it for a laugh, Sherlock. Here, eat some more pad thai. *Top Gear* will never be reasonable, that’s not what it’s for. Just sit back and laugh at the man.”

Sherlock glares at John, then settles back on the couch and glares at the screen. Standing before an obviously fake headstone, Jeremy Clarkson attributes the declining population of Sheffield to Reliant Robin crash fatalities; John mutters, “Bloody Thatcher,” and snickers. Jeremy Clarkson drives the Reliant onto a cricket field and overturns it right on the pitch; John giggles. When Jeremy Clarkson drives the car out of the repair shop having fitted it with stabilizers that enable him to corner insouciantly, for a while, Sherlock guffaws.

*  

One evening, Sherlock plays the violin. He glances at the instrument’s case a dozen times while they eat, until John elbows him and says, “Oh, go on then.”

“What?”

Sherlock trying to play dumb is a nonstarter. “You’ve been looking over there all night. I know you play a lot — even I’m not so thick I didn’t notice the sheet music on the stand is never the same twice in a row, but you keep coming back to a fellow named Batch.”

“Bach,” Sherlock says, automatically.

John snorts, straightfaced. Sherlock draws in his chin to give him the Offended Turtle look.

“Come on,” John says. “Yeah, I’m taking the piss a bit, but any idiot could work out you play seriously, and this idiot can see you’re pining for the fjords tonight. You must’ve missed practice or
something. So play. I’ll be impressed, I can pretty much promise you.”

“Fjords.” Sherlock is stalling.

John flaps his hand. “Not important. No solution to a crime will ever hinge on your knowledge of 1970s comedy genius. Play.”

Sherlock starts with a few short arpeggio bursts; he adjusts the tuning; for thirty seconds, perhaps a minute, he’s visibly self-conscious; and then he sings. That is, everything about him sings. His gaze turns inward, concentrated, tender. His hands … all right, so when people speak of a musician touching his instrument like a lover, they’re not making it up. John wants to bring those hands to his mouth; he wants to draw his lips along Sherlock’s fingers as he would draw them along Sherlock’s cock; he wants to see those hands flex against the sheets while Sherlock cries out under him. Married to my work, flattered by your interest, he reminds himself. It’s impossible, though, not to be transfixed by Sherlock’s communion with his bow and his violin, and for this little while, at least, John gives up the struggle.

* Sherlock doesn’t play before anyone; there’s no one to play before (no one to play for). He begins at the beginning, with the first sonata in the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. Bach’s own annotations emphasize that the sonatas and partitas are to be played alone, and the music presses against the limits of the instrument — meaning the limits of the musician, as well as those of the violin he holds. Sherlock has always felt well matched with this brilliant and solitary extremity, but now as he plays he finds himself glancing furtively at John, who might have been flung into his chair, his eyes wide, his lips slightly parted. Something unfamiliar is happening: it seems to Sherlock that … that John is taking up the music and sending it back to him, as if the music traveled toward John and then returned — no, as if John restored it to Sherlock, gave it back stronger and … completed somehow, so that the notes don’t dissipate entirely but draw a shimmering web between him and his — his friend. Fanciful, Sherlock thinks, trying for contempt, but he’s helpless against this joy. He plays through the first sonata and partita without stopping and then lays away the violin and sits down. Is he supposed to speak now? Mr. Friedenberg used to talk about the harmonic structure of the dance movements in the first partita —

“I’m— Thank you, Sherlock. I don’t— I don’t know how to express myself. That was glorious. God, I sound like an idiot.”

Sherlock should say something cutting. “Really, John. I shouldn’t trouble to look for employment as a music critic, if I were you.” But he doesn’t achieve the intended effect, it seems, because John is smiling, that Sherlock-surrounding smile, the one that makes Sherlock feel foolish and happy, and John says:

“You’ll play for me again, though, till my brain expands and I can flatter you all day long. Should just take a century or two, yeah?”

Sherlock has never before considered the possibility that his time in John’s company may not come to an end. This brings into sharp focus the awareness of what he in fact expects: next month, or the month after, or the month after that, John will leave. Sherlock is well aware that he angers people, that he doesn’t understand most of their jokes, that what interests him bores or intimidates almost everyone else. He takes a deep breath and starts talking about the pancreatic samples he hopes to get from Molly in the coming week.

*
Another evening, another crime scene. It really doesn’t get old, John thinks.

“So how did you and Sherlock meet, then?” Behind Lestrade, Sherlock is studying some marks on the windowsill; John sees him go still. Right, so “We have physiotherapy at the same time every Tuesday and Friday, and he caught me staring at the braces on his legs” is not the correct answer. How is it that John knows this and yet he and Sherlock have never discussed a cover story? It’s a pity John is such a terrible liar; he uses up all his resources in that department pretending to himself that he’s not well gone on Sherlock, his faint hope being that in doing so he’ll somehow manage to deceive Sherlock as well.

After far too long, he comes up with “We kept running into each other at the same doner kebab place.” Behind Lestrade, Sherlock rolls his eyes.

“Ah,” says Lestrade. “Hard to picture Sherlock in one of those, somehow.” Christ and all the saints, he’s chuckling.

John hears “You eat?”; sees again the interrogative look Lestrade gave him in the autopsy room during the Goldensohn case; realizes that Lestrade thinks “doner kebab place” is a cover for “gay bar,” and that Lestrade can’t quite picture Sherlock on the pull.

“No,” Lestrade says, laughing outright now, “I can’t say I’d’ve taken Sherlock for a doner kebab fan.” He claps John on the shoulder: John met Sherlock in a gay bar; John is Sherlock’s boyfriend; he wishes them well.

“The thing is,” Lestrade goes on, abruptly serious, walking John away from Sherlock’s windowsill and lowering his voice, “for most of us being on the right side of the law isn’t really a choice, is it? We’re connected to people, we don’t want to see them hurt. Besides, we’re smart enough to know that if we went wrong, other people as smart as we are would catch us.

“But Sherlock. Who is he connected to? That landlady of his, a bit. There’s someone in New York he mentions, a chemist. I met a brother once — well, that was ages past, and Sherlock shut me down hard a while back when I asked after him. Now there’s you. I’ve known Sherlock since I was a new DS, and I’ve never heard of anybody else. You know of any family?” John shakes his head, though he can guess, now, who Umbrella Man must be.

“Yeah, it’s not human connections that keep him straight,” Lestrade continues. “Is it fear of getting caught? Don’t make me laugh. So, what I think. I think where most of the rest of us pretty much have to be good, or any road law-abiding, Sherlock chooses.”

“Yeah.” John clears his throat. “Yeah, I know.” Sherlock could choose otherwise than he does, and Sherlock is good. Funny that Lestrade should be so spectacularly wrong about John’s relationship with Sherlock, but so spectacularly right about this.

“He’s a right prick sometimes, though, I’ll give Donovan and Anderson that. Christ, what a filthy look he’s giving me. Let’s go hear what he’s got to say.”

*  

By now, John can tell the difference between Sherlock absorbed in his thoughts or his phone, and Sherlock stewing. In the cab after his inspection of the crime scene, Sherlock is definitely stewing.

“All right, you, what’s on that mind of yours?”
“I’m thinking, Doctor. I realize you haven’t much familiarity with the process.”

“Maybe not, but I can spot a preemptive strike when I see one. What, does it bother you Lestrade thinks we’re dating?” And doesn’t the idea that it does bother Sherlock have a sting in its tail.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Hold on, you think he was warning me away.”

Glare.

“More the opposite, really. He has a very good opinion of you, Sherlock.”

The glare reduces itself to suspicious examination and then to a sniff and a shrug.

“He’s not the only one, either. Git.”

Sherlock’s back to looking at his phone, but the corner of his mouth turns up.

*

From time to time it occurs to John that he should pull back a bit, try to meet someone he could have a real relationship with. Or at least he should go out, see who was available and might like to get a leg over. But (just admit it, Watson) he’s glad to be with Sherlock on any terms Sherlock will allow. All the same, when he sees an email from Bill Murray in his In box, he feels as if someone has opened a hatch labeled “Escape This Way.” Or at least, “Brief Respite This Way.” Or at least, “Subject: Dinner and?” Hell yes.

It’s been weeks since John missed a Tuesday or Friday evening with Sherlock; he has to work to ignore the pang he feels as he sends the text:

JW to SH, 11:40 a.m.:

army mate in london, short leave, got to bow out of tues phys & supper.

SH to JW, 11:43 a.m.:

Was not aware we had any arrangement in place. SH

John mutters an imprecation.

JW to SH, 11:48 a.m.:

several months’ precedent didn’t clue you in?

JW to SH, 11:58 a.m.:

will be at physio fri as usual, expect supper & argument to follow

SH to JW, 12:02 p.m.:

A dubious prospect, given argument implies ordered reasoning consequent on thought. SH

SH to JW, 12:05 p.m.:

I shall look forward to it. Meanwhile, enjoy your doner kebab. SH
John spends the next five minutes cleaning coffee out of the crevices between the keys on his phone.

Bill — Bill looks great. The affinity between them has never faltered even now that they see each other only a couple of times a year. John suspects neither of them really understands why they haven’t fallen for each other; so many of their parts fit well together, yet the machine never quite organizes itself to go. He’s training military surgeons at Strensall now, in the Bastion replica hospital there. “Often,” he claims over their starters, “I get as much as six hours’ sleep.” John boggles at him dramatically.

“How’s the shoulder?” Bill is more than entitled to ask this, considering how much emotional heavy lifting he did during John’s stay — “your incarceration,” he calls it — at Queen Elizabeth’s, when John could hardly bring himself to open his eyes some days.

“Not bad. Physio twice a week. It does help, but I’ll probably never get full range of motion back.”

“Good thing you had the forethought to make yourself ambidextrous with a flogger, then.”

“Not much call for my skills these days. Course, I do know an invitation when it’s engraved.”

“Oh, good, you’re accepting.”

“Yeah,” John says softly. “Yeah, that’d be nice. My flat — it’s not much but the walls are thick, and I still have my kit. Unless you’re staying someplace you’d rather go?”

“Nah, yours is good.” They fall into a pleasant, anticipatory silence.

“John. I’ve got to say, I’m surprised you’re not seeing anyone. You always were, before. Well.”

John looks into his coffee.

“And this is not about your shoulder, I’ve known you too long and I know when something’s up. Who is it?”

“Yeah, all right. Bloke I met in physio. Entirely mad. He’s a detective — not police, he works for himself. He cured my limp — remember my limp? I think he just distracted me from it. We’re mates and I’m an idiot.”

Bill has been wincing sympathetically throughout this. “So, not kinky?”

“Not anything, as far as I can see. Or, no, sometimes I could swear he fancies me, but he says he doesn’t date. End of.”

“I can’t quite believe there’s anyone unavailable to you. Which continents were they, remind me?”

“Fuck yourself” — but John’s laughing, bless Bill the Dispeller of Melancholy. “I was in Her Majesty’s bleeding army, wasn’t I? Carted me all about the place, didn’t they? A couple of blow jobs and a few twisted nipples, you’d think I was bloody Casanova.”

“Casanova needs a shag,” Bill says as they walk in the door of John’s flat. He’s already stripping.

“Yeah, just hang on there.” Bill stops cold. “Just — yeah, just stand like that, right by the bed, that’s pretty, with your shirt half off like that.” John pushes it down off Bill’s shoulders and runs his hand
over Bill’s chest and down toward his trousers. “Anything new I should know?”

Bill shakes his head. “No, no injuries, no new no-go areas, no suddenly acquired taste for fireplay.”

“Good, I’m not equipped for that. Safeword?”

“Same old yellow and red. Three grunts if I can’t talk.”

That reliable heat is already drawing toward John’s goin; he leans Bill in for a slow, stoking kiss, thumb at the hinge of Bill’s jaw to urge his mouth open. “Right, get the rest of those clothes off now.” John keeps his own clothes on; they both like that contrast with Bill’s nakedness. “You like that, me pinching your balls? Yeah, you do, you’re already hard, just from that. Like a bloody teenager you are. Stand here, don’t touch yourself.”

John picks cuffs, a long rawhide lace, scissors, gag, lube, and condoms out of his toy box; when he turns back, he can see Bill’s already heading down, shoulders loose, lips slightly parted, head bowed, hands clasped at the small of his back. He fucks Bill’s mouth gently with two, then three fingers, slapping his cock with every stroke, palm then backhand in an easy rhythm, back and forth, Bill suckling at his fingers, licking at them where they’re pressed together. John doubles over the head of Bill’s cock and gives it a hard flick with his middle finger. Bill yelps and suckles harder.

John cuffs Bill’s wrists behind his back, then takes the rawhide and wraps a couple of turns around the base of Bill’s cock, a couple more around his balls, and urges Bill’s thighs wider apart so he can easily pass the lace between his legs and up to the chain between the cuffs. He ties the lace to the chain, putting just enough tension on it so that if Bill draws his cuffed hands up or pumps his hips he’ll give his own balls a tug. Bill groans. John double-checks that he laid the scissors right next to his bedside lamp so he can cut the rawhide fast if he needs to. He cups Bill’s balls and kisses him again. Bill’s far gone now, mouth soft and sloppy just the way John likes it. “On your knees, now.”

Bill whimpers and arches his back to put slack in the cord as he lowers himself. “Bend over, head and shoulders on the floor. That’s nice, that’s just right. Now spread your knees. Wider. Hold still.”

John lubes a finger and starts opening Bill up. Much as Bill loves fingers, a plug, a cock in his arse, he has a hard time relaxing the muscles enough to take them. Just as well, then, that John loves the process, loves slowly teasing himself as well as whoever he’s topping. He circles Bill’s hole with his finger softly, softly, the rawhide cord getting in his way, which supplies an excuse to tug on it; he adds pressure to Bill’s sphincter in minute increments, until Bill is whispering “Please, please, please” in time with John’s finger and he slides it in easily. In, out, in, out, a nice sharp tug on the rawhide: Bill bucks and yelps. John laughs and strokes Bill’s sac with his other hand. “That hurt, didn’t it. You like that so much. I’m going to plug you up and hurt you more.” Two fingers. He finds Bill’s prostate — it’s high up and hard to reach. Bill bucks and yelps. John strokes his perineum and his balls at every yelp. Bill is reduced to a high whine now. John withholds his fingers and replaces them with the plug, a nice long one to hit that high-up prostate. “There, look at you, trussed and plugged. Kneel up.” Bill is almost too gone to manage this, so John hauls him up by the hair. Bill’s eyes are closed and his mouth is open: get him to this state and all he wants is to have his face fucked, but John wants to hurt him some more, first. He kisses Bill’s cheeks and the corners of his eyes and jacks him slowly, cupping his arse with the other hand. Bill trembles and whimpers. Yeah.

John draws Bill over his lap, checks the circulation in his hands and balls, plucks at the cord briskly three or four times to emphasize for Bill how vulnerable he is and because he likes the sounds Bill makes, and then settles in for a spanking. Bill has a love-hate relationship with spanking: he loves the physical sensation and finds the associations almost unbearably humiliating. Almost unbearably. John has a hard hand when he wants to, and right now he wants Bill to take the pain and embarrassment
for him without liking it, just because that’s what John requires, so he doesn’t supply much more of a warm-up than Bill’s got from the scene so far but instead lays down a dozen hard slaps, fast, each one hurting in itself and making Bill flinch away and give his balls a jerk too, so by the end Bill is crying out full-throated with each blow. John strokes his arse to soothe him and then delivers a dozen more. And again. And again. Bill’s arse is hot to the touch and bright red and now, now, John is ready; he pulls Bill back up to kneel again, holds a tissue to his face so he can blow his nose, and fits the O-ring gag. “Fucktoy,” he whispers in Bill’s ear. He stands up and opens his trousers and puts a condom on, then grabs Bill’s hair and shoves himself into Bill’s mouth, hard, hitting the back of Bill’s throat. He’s had a fine, fine buildup and it doesn’t take him long.

Bill pants and leans his head against John’s thigh while John gets rid of the gag and the condom. John undoes the rawhide and opens the cuffs, then draws Bill into his lap and strokes him till he comes into John’s hand, gasping. John pulls a blanket off the bed on top of them and spoons behind Bill, kissing his shoulder while Bill reaches behind himself to take out the plug. His arse always tenses right up again after orgasm, so he never wants anyone else near it then. He exhales hard as he pulls the plug free, then tosses it up onto John’s bed; the floor never seems to either of them like quite the right way station between arse and bathroom sink. They lie there for a few minutes, comfortable. Bill laughs on a breath.

“How?"

“Just thinking that you haven’t lost your touch.”

John gives him a squeeze. “Always a pleasure, thanks. You good here for a bit, or should I get us cleaned up?”

“I’m good. Stay where you are, you’re keeping me warm.”


*

Sherlock begins Tuesday evening with a round of pacing. Should he have made that joke about doner kebab? People, friends, do joke about sex, of course he knows that, he has observed it. It seems to promote fellow-feeling. Camaraderie. Is that what he and John experience, camaraderie? Very likely, John will in fact be having sex tonight, or he would have replied to the doner kebab text, refuting it: “no kebab, sad to say,” for example. Sherlock considers what form the sex might take. John seems to devote similar amounts of attention to women and to men, so probably he is bisexual, and an “army mate” is much more likely to be male than female. So John is having sex with a man tonight. Sherlock pictures their flat bellies pressed together, line against line as if in a drawing. Plane against plane. Sherlock’s chest feels tight. He remembers the bulb of Jim’s cock, how it fit just behind Sherlock’s teeth and then seemed abruptly too large when Jim pushed forward. He presses his hand between his legs and his eyes prickle. He wills Lestrade to have a case. His phone lies on the coffee table; he gives it the most malignant look he can summon. It buzzes.

Chapter End Notes

Marisa Westen’s career fraud very roughly resembles the case of Soma Sengupta,
reported in the New York Times on February 13, 2013, and elsewhere. As far as I know, though, Sengupta doesn’t have a large boyfriend, isn’t diabetic, and hasn’t killed anybody, with insulin or otherwise.

Jeremy Clarkson is a turd in human shape, but lord help us, that episode of *Top Gear* is funny.

I know almost nothing about music. I chose Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin for Sherlock just because I love them, and happily in researching them came across this:

“[M]any eminent 19th century artists (including Mendelssohn and Schumann) felt compelled to treat the violin score as mere melody and added a piano part to fill in the harmony. Yet, Bach took great care to avoid such treatment — not only did he label the cover page ‘Sei soli a violino senza Basso accompagnato’ (‘six solos for violin without bass accompaniment’) but he emphatically repeated this admonition at the beginning of each piece.” Bach’s emphasis on the sonatas' and partitas’ status as solo works seemed perfect for Sherlock and for his discovery that having John as listener somehow completes the music and the experience of playing it.

There is a replica of the Camp Bastion hospital at the Strensall army base, in Yorkshire; medical personnel deploying to Bastion are, or I suppose by now it's "were," trained there.
John’s looking forward to Friday evening (Be honest, Watson) — to seeing Sherlock (Be reasonable, Watson), but Lestrade preempts him by calling on Thursday afternoon.

“I’ve got your Sherlock here, John. Any inclination to collect him? And have a medical look at him, too, while you’re about it?”

John has a bad moment before he registers that Lestrade sounds only exasperated and worried, no worse. “What’s up, then?” He can hear muffled complaining in the background.

“Eh, he’s gone and solved a case for us, the bastard — I mean the suspect, of course,” Lestrade says piously, “not Sherlock.” (The complaining has now devolved to full-throated whingeing.) “I don’t think he’s slept since Tuesday and now he’s in my office practically hallucinating and he won’t bloody well go home!” Lestrade must have turned toward Sherlock and away from the receiver for that last, but even so John’s ear is ringing. He rubs it and switches the phone to the other side. “Yeah, I’ll be over soon’s I can.” There’s only one more patient on his schedule, and anyway he has a feeling he knows what’s wrong; hanging about bitching in Lestrade’s office won’t do Sherlock any harm, as long as he’s resting his legs while he does it.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” says Lestrade when John appears. The relief on his face would be funny if John didn’t have a good idea of why Sherlock was putting on so grand a strop — or so grand an imitation of a strop. Sherlock is wearing his careful blank face now, the one that broadcasts “You look like ants from here.” John sits in the chair he isn’t occupying.

“How bad is it?” he asks, gently.

“You needn’t put on mild-mannered and beguiling airs, Doctor.”
John has taken careful note of the occasions when Sherlock calls him “Doctor.” “Beguiling” isn’t half bad, though; inwardly, he polishes his knuckles against a nonexistent lapel. His outward self keeps its hands in his lap and looks down at them, waiting. At last, Sherlock mutters:

“The muscles may not be entirely adequate, at the moment, to a normal gait.”

The Sherlock-to-English dictionary may not be entirely adequate, either, but John takes this to mean “I’m not sure I can walk.”

“Any pain?”

Sherlock shrugs. “A sort of electrical sensation. Not — not intense. In the left leg, chiefly.”

“That’s the weaker leg, yeah?”

“Why do you ask, when you surely know?”

John smiles, which elicits the opening movements of the Offended Turtle. “Easy, Sherlock. I like a good snarking-at, it tells me you’re feeling —” He catches himself, because what he wants to say is something like “safer,” or “less alone.” “Better.” There, that’s vague enough. Sherlock throws him a contemptuous sidelong look. *Yep, got away with it.*

“I meant to tell you over dinner tomorrow,” he says carefully, “but as you’ve worked yourself into exhaustion and we’ll be sitting here for the next little while, now should suit.”

Sherlock’s *hair* is minatory.

“It’s like this. I’ve got a friend — ”

“Well, isn’t that interesting. John files it. “No, not ‘doner kebab.’ I mean, yes, all right” — John is exquisitely aware that he is blushing — “but not that friend, a different friend. Dave. I was thinking it was time I called in a favor from back in the day — I taught him enough neuroanatomy in twenty-four hours to help him pass an exam he had no business passing. Not that it mattered, he went on to make a fortune in video games. And” — John pauses for effect — “he’s got a lovely house in the country. Near Guildford.”

The look of pain on Sherlock’s face is delicious. “Surely, John, even a person of limited mental capacity who had spent as much time in my company as you have would be aware that I — ” He stops dead. A deductive “Oh!” escapes.

“No, there’s something about this particular country house that you think I’ll like.” The fingers come up, tap the lower lip. John bites the inside of his mouth to keep back a snort. *No, don’t wait for me to tell you — deduce it. The conversation is so much more peacock-y that way.* “A medical school friend. But not devoted to his studies and not academically inclined. He makes a fortune in *video games*” — this phrase is spoken as if held in tongs, lest it sully the mouth — “and buys a house in Surrey. A trophy, of course.

“No, there’s something about this particular country house that you think I’ll like.” The fingers come up, tap the lower lip. John bites the inside of his mouth to keep back a snort. *No, don’t wait for me to tell you — deduce it. The conversation is so much more peacock-y that way.* “A medical school friend. But not devoted to his studies and not academically inclined. He makes a fortune in *video games*” — this phrase is spoken as if held in tongs, lest it sully the mouth — “and buys a house in Surrey. A trophy, of course.

“Now, what appurtenances might such a house have that you confidently believe would interest me? Possibly a library, if sufficiently arcane, but we speak here of a video game mogul. He might show off with rare books — no, I see by your look of self-satisfaction that this is not the case.” *(My look of self-satisfaction, is it?* thinks John, as loudly as he can. Sherlock smirks at him.)

“In any case a book is interesting to me only insofar as I value its content.
“Stolen art? No, that would contravene your desire that I rest” — again the tongs — “and in any event you wouldn’t knowingly be the friend of a man who held stolen art.

“I conclude that it must be topiary.”

John bursts out laughing — but the joke was evidently a tactical maneuver, because it has enabled Sherlock to spot something in his face. “Oh! It is something botanical, then. And you think it would tempt me. I am fond of old tea roses, John, but I suspect your imaginings are less subtle. Perhaps a greenhouse of poisonous plants?”

(Sherlock reclines among fragrant roses, bees suckle and buzz around him, the hand trailing down his throat to slip along the plackets of his unbuttoned shirt is John’s hand — )

“You’re a marvel.” God, he has managed to keep nothing out of his voice, nothing at all.

“Well.” Sherlock coughs a little, and there is his fugitive smile, the one that makes John want to stand like a drawn sword between him and the world. “I suppose a greenhouse of poisonous plants sounds not unbearably dismal. And since our host will be in California …”

“But the botanist will be there. And you do realize I’m insisting you ask him before you take samples, Sherlock?” John counts silently, gazing up at the juncture of wall and ceiling.

At four: “Oh, all right.”

“Thank you. Now explain, please, how you knew Dave would be away, to say nothing of where, and then tell me all about this case that’s got you so knackered. Lestrade says you’re singlehandedly responsible for their arresting this Maupertuis fellow, some kind of fake nobility was he?”

By the time Sherlock has finished detailing his own brilliance (there’s a video-game developers’ conference going on this weekend, apparently, so it followed as the night the day that a video-game mogul would be there; the Maupertuis case, however, is so convoluted that John resorts to taking notes), his legs are steady enough to enable him to walk outside with an arm around John and hail a cab. John thinks to joke — how convenient it is that all of NSY believe he’s Sherlock’s boyfriend already — but that’s too much like lying about the tenderness he feels when he takes Sherlock’s weight against his strong right side, so he takes deep, quiet breaths and says nothing.

★

You hear all kinds of things about Guildford, says the chatty botanist, whose name is Sam Pope and who has picked up John and Sherlock at the station. (“Oh, Dave asked me to save you the cab fare. No problem!”) He regales them with an inventory of opinion, ranging from bland to repugnant: (a) Guildford, an historic and pretty market town in Surrey, where it’s tough to find parking on the weekends; (b) Guildford, a bling-draped sea of chavs; (c, but really a subset of b) Guildford, where housing-estate scum get drunk, assault women, drink some more, and then puke it all up.

Or: Eh, Guildford’s a lot like most places, and the people are like most people, kind of a mixed bag, and who the hell understands the British class system. That’s Sam Pope’s take, anyway.

“Funny thing, though, right in time for a visiting detective, we’ve had a string of burglaries,” Pope says as they turn out of the car park. In the back seat, Sherlock curls his lip. Simultaneously John launches his most forceful prima-donna-silencing glare, thus diverting speech into the inaudible channel of a head toss.

“Three or four of them so far. Just a bunch of cash, jewelry, electronics, the kind of thing you get insured and who cares, really, but the last one was the other night and it’s put people on edge, some.
It’s just they took such weird things this time. You have to wonder if the guy is some kind of psycho.”

Sherlock is sinking ostentatiously further down into his seat, rolling his eyes and walking the fingers of one hand up and down his trouser leg like a six-year-old while he texts with the other hand. John’s phone buzzes: “You told me the idiot would be IN AMERICA. SH.” Another buzz: “Not that there was a second idiot who would BE AMERICAN. SH.” John puts his hand in front of his own mouth, clears his throat, and manages:

“Oh, really? What was taken?”

“They read it all on the news this morning, kind of a funny list. Let’s see if I can remember … Okay, yeah. A TV remote. A boxed set of The IT Crowd. One of those lucky Japanese cats with a paw raised, you know those? All wrapped in the tablecloth from the dining room table.”

During this recitation, Sherlock has slid back up in his seat. “The tablecloth,” he says, sharply.

“Oh, that’s smart, Mr. Holmes. You’re thinking antique textiles? No, the guy on the news said specifically the police had checked. It was just something from Marks & Sparks.”

“Mmmf.” Sherlock throws himself against the seat back again. His hands, forefingers steepled, rise to his mouth. John surprises himself by reaching into the back and pulling them away. Surprises Sherlock too — the head draws back, the eyes widen — but oh, how uncomfortable that pleasant scrutiny has suddenly become. “You’re meant to rest, remember? No deducing.”

Sherlock blinks and lets go whatever he was thinking about the burglary or has just read on John’s face. “I can’t help it, you know,” he says, quietly, as if Sam Pope weren’t there, though John can see him watching Sherlock in the rearview.

“Repeat after me: ‘It was an adolescent prank. It was an adolescent prank,’” John says.

“But it wasn’t.”

John lifts a shoulder, acquiescing. “I know. And I know it’s catnip to you. Just, I dunno, try and stick with the poisonous plants for a weekend?”

“Catnip isn’t poisonous,” Sherlock replies, which when John comes to think about it is a non sequitur. Contrary. On his face is the look of happiness John remembers from their very first da— from the very first time he brought over Indian takeaway.

Shit oh shit oh shit. John doesn’t have a crush on Sherlock. He isn’t attracted to Sherlock. He isn’t hot for Sherlock. He is in love with Sherlock. He would do anything for Sherlock. Sherlock is John’s water and his breath. Steady, oh steady, steady. He tries to attend to how good-looking Sam Pope is.

Sam Pope is fit, and though he sounded like an idiot when he described the burglaries, Sherlock grudgingly admits that he’s not completely stupid about plants; he doesn’t have an Internet Ph.D., but a proper one, from Harvard, and Sherlock saw John looking at him on the drive from the station, John’s eye sweeping over the line of Sam Pope’s shoulders. John probably considers Sam Pope a catch.

“Pity it’s so difficult to grow here,” he says as he and Sam Pope contemplate the lone specimen of Cerbera odollam, the suicide tree. Or it might as well be the homicide tree. How fortunate are the Indian detectives presented with cases of cerberin poisoning, which presents a real challenge, the
taste being easily masked with culinary spices and the metabolites difficult to identify on autopsy.

Sherlock sighs with envy.

Pope gives him a startled look. “I suppose! On the other hand, there’s plenty of oleanders in the UK, and it’s the same family.”

“But oleander is not nearly so effective.” There: Pope is wide-eyed. Yes. “I wonder” — Sherlock presses his advantage — “whether I might ask you for a few specimens. — Only of some of the more common plants,” he hastens to add, demurely. “You see, it’s one thing to read about their properties, and a quite different matter to know what their ash looks like, or how they smell when the leaf is crushed. That practical knowledge is so useful in my work.” He produces an oily smile.

John takes a long, comfortable meander around the garden. Even this early in the year, when little has greened out and even less has blossomed, the place is beautiful, beautiful in its bones. The paths are laid out so that at each turning a walker finds himself looking upon a neatly framed view; lay each over the one just before it and they begin to resemble a sequence of images from a magic lantern. It’s so enchanting that John is free of Sherlock for a while; by the time he returns to the side door and remembers that he’s hopelessly in love, he has found, to his surprise, some equanimity. He’s always been able to separate sex from love, when he had to; playing with Bill had been fun and satisfying, and, all right, it wasn’t everything it could have been with Sherlock as a partner, but at least he has a rich friendship with someone who is his heart’s delight. If he has to get off elsewhere, then he has to get off elsewhere. There’s a line from a poem … “thousands have lived without love, not one without water” — that’s it. And, yes, okay, a pang comes with the thought. He takes one last look at the garden with all its promises, and then goes back inside.

Sherlock is in the kitchen with a pair of metal tongs, his laptop, and the gas range going full blaze. On the table are scattered numerous translucent packets of botanical specimens.

“Sam let you take all those?”

“Yes. He seemed quite eager to be alone; I expect that providing me with specimens was the most expeditious means of attaining that goal.”

Sherlock has taken up a leaf with his tongs and is holding it over the flame. Because he appears to be speaking to the leaf, John’s suspicions are aroused. Also because the more prolix Sherlock gets, and the more indifferent he sounds, the higher the probability that he is hiding something.

“What did you do to him?”

“Oh, pish, John, he did it all himself. I can’t help it if people draw erroneous inferences from insufficient data.”


Sherlock looks up from his shriveling leaf. “You know my methods, Detective Watson.”

“All right, you were looking at poisonous plants with him, and since that’s his line of work and you’re well educated and more than an amateur, he should have been happy to stay and talk shop with you. But he didn’t do that — in fact, now I think of it, while I was walking around the garden I noticed his car isn’t in the drive. He’s buggered right off.

“You misled him somehow — you’ve admitted that much. For him to leave, it must’ve been
something that alarmed him. Let’s see: clever detective, alarmed botanist, poisonous plants. Could you possibly, just maybe, have led him to believe you’re a serial killer, Sherlock?”

“I did no such thing.” But Sherlock’s shoulders are shaking with laughter.

“By which you mean, you didn’t exactly tell him you were a serial killer, you just sprinkled pixie dust in his face and made him wonder. My God, you are a perfect horror.” John can barely get the last sentence out around the snorts that keep escaping. “He’s a very nice man, Sherlock. I don’t know why you — ” And that’s it, he gives up and gives himself over, laughing until he has to wipe his face.

All in all, it’s a lovely evening. John parks himself on the counter and reads a clever enough mystery (Sherlock keeps trying to tell him the killer’s name, which he has evidently guessed from a glance at the jacket copy, and John keeps sticking his fingers in his ears and saying “I can’t hear you, so shut up”) while Sherlock variously desiccates, burns, crushes, and mutilates the leaves, stems, seeds, and flowers of several dozen species of poisonous plants, making notes on the results and emitting satisfied noises. There is an interval of crowding Sherlock out of the way so John can heat the packaged shepherd’s pie he has found in the freezer, and then another interval that involves placing bits of warm pie in front of Sherlock and pretending not to notice that he’s eating them.

Yes, it’s a lovely evening.

*Naturally, because Sherlock always gets what he wants, and what Sherlock always wants is a tasty murder, the next morning brings just that. John is just shoving a mug of tea in front of his friend when Sam Pope rushes in breathless. “God, did you hear what happened?”

“No,” says John, “and don’t worry, he was with me all evening.” He hears Sherlock make a choking noise. “What was it, then?”

“There’s been another burglary, only this time the guy killed somebody.”

Sherlock does not pretend to be bored: his head snaps up and he alerts all over, as if scenting prey. “Go on.”

“It was at the Cunninghams’ place — just down the road. They have a PA, Tom Kirwan, well, they had a PA. Oh gosh.

“Anyway, both of the Cunninghams saw it — they heard a burglar in the house, and Tom chased him outside. Tom actually caught the guy, cornered him I guess, and the guy just stabbed him and took off. Jasper, that’s the son, they’re father and son, ran out and found Tom on the ground dying. He called 911 — 999, I mean — but I guess Tom had lost too much blood, or, I don’t know. Anyway, that’s the story.”

Sherlock’s lip has curled to an impressive degree. “I don’t suppose either father or son was able to offer a description of the killer.”

“No. It was just after sunset, so it was still light out, but this all happened on the eastern side of the house.” Pope laughs weakly. “Botanists and gardeners. We always notice the exposure.”

“Sherlock …” John begins, but whatever slim chance he has of keeping Sherlock busy with his plant specimens when he’s smelled something fishy about a case is dashed at once, because a knocking at the door proves to have been produced by a detective constable from the Surrey Police.
She introduces herself as Tracey Barwood, and she homes right in on Sherlock: “Mr. Holmes, I’m honored to meet you. I heard you were in the vicinity, and Detective Inspector Lestrade — ”

But Sherlock is already up and throwing his blue scarf over his great big pretentious black coat. (In which he looks fucking gorgeous, whispers John’s unhelpful inner voice. As if I needed reminding, he retorts to himself, sourly.) “Yes, yes, lovely to meet you, et cetera, where’s the crime scene? Hurry up, John, you don’t want to miss our ride.”

John levels a look at Sam Pope, because there’s no way D.C. Barwood just happened to be talking about Sherlock with Lestrade. Sam demonstrates his wisdom by cringing a little. “Oh, just clear away our breakfast dishes, will you?” John says. “God only knows what time Sherlock will keep us out till if this turns out to be complicated.” He gets his donkey jacket off the back of the door and trots after Sherlock to Barwood’s waiting car.

Little is said on the short drive to the Cunninghams’; Barwood starts in telling Sherlock about the evidence so far, but he cuts her off: “Don’t contaminate my mind with nitwitted speculations, please.” Barwood raises an eyebrow in the rearview, so John can see it. He shrugs apologetically; if he had her mobile number, and if she weren’t driving, he would text her to let her know how astonishing it is that Sherlock appended a “please” to that insult. No matter, Lestrade has doubtless filled her in on the Sherlockian Grand Manner.

The crime scene is nearly useless, because the ground is muddy from recent rains and the emergency medical team have trodden any physical evidence deep into the muck in their futile efforts to save Tom Kirwan. There’s a string outline of where the body lay, and a single flag stuck in the ground about six feet away. Sherlock points his chin at it.

“His iPhone was found there,” Barwood says, promptly. John feels a flare of approval, because of course everyone he meets now stands or falls on their ability to deal with Sherlock. “You might be interested to know this: all the texts and call records from the several hours before his death had been erased.”

Sherlock beams, he claps his hands, and— Was that a little hop? “Oh, yes of course they were! This is turning out to be a splendid weekend, John, splendid.”

Behind him, the Cunninghams have emerged from the house in time to hear. They stop dead just short of the caution tape and look at each other, father and son, both beaky and with crisply cut straight hair. Jasper, the son, is thirtyish, his father perhaps sixty. They could be widely separated brothers — even, John fancies, twins, had one been cryogenically preserved while the other lived and aged in the quotidian world.

They will already have met D.C. Barwood, of course, so it’s to her that the father directs himself: “Who are these people?” Sherlock’s expression is amiable, and John’s insides accordingly tense.

Barwood’s demeanor has taken a trajectory opposite to Sherlock’s: where he’s all smiles, her previous mildness has frosted over. “I have to remind you, Mr. Cunningham, that for now this is not your private garden but rather a crime scene. You may presume that anyone standing on this side of the tape is here on police business.”

Good lord. If Barwood’s not careful, she’ll find Sherlock thinking as well of her as he does of Lestrade. John’s ready to stand her a pint right now.

Cunningham deflates. “Of course, of course. I do apologize if I seemed peremptory.” Sherlock’s nod
in response is regal. Damn the man, he has got to stop making John want to laugh at crime scenes.

“Thank you, Mr. Cunningham,” says Barwood. “As it happens, we’re lucky enough to have Mr. Sherlock Holmes here, who consults for the Met on serious crimes, and his colleague Dr. John Watson.”

Sherlock, all beaming geniality, shakes Cunningham’s hand. “It’s Sherlock, please. And John.”

“Alistair Cunningham. This is my son, Jasper.” Handshakes all around.

Sherlock continues: “I’m so sorry this terrible episode has intruded on your lives.” John has to look down; this and other false Sherlocks are often useful in investigations, but they’re never comfortable for John to watch.

“Look,” Alistair Cunningham says, now all helpfulness, “we can show you exactly where the killer escaped. There’s a break in the hedge, just here.”

“Yes,” Sherlock replies. “Of course, it is demarcated by the caution tape, so I expect I would have stumbled on it sooner or later.”

Oh. Here’s what it is: Sherlock Holmes solves crimes by looking at the evidence; John Watson solves them by looking at Sherlock Holmes.

“There doesn’t seem to be much in the way of evidence,” Jasper Cunningham puts in.

Barwood has been absorbed in studying the patch of ground where Kirwan’s iPhone was found; she speaks absently: “Oh, I don’t know. We’ll recover— ”

But whatever she was about to say is cut off by Sherlock’s cry of pain. All present whirl toward where he has collapsed on the wet grass near the break in the hedge, his left leg drawn up and his back arched spasmodically. “Sherlock!” John drops to his knees and puts his hand to Sherlock’s wrist. Pulse strong and steady. And with the eye on the side away from everyone else, the patient winks at him.

“He has acute episodes of hereditary … ah, autoimmune myclonus,” John says over his shoulder, toward the others. “Very unfortunate.” Especially in that I just invented it. Wait, what did Barwood say the Cunninghams do for a living? Wine-ratings magazine, that’s it. “It’s not contagious, but there’s no treatment; if we could just let him rest a bit, he should recover within … ” How much time does Sherlock need, anyway? John takes a guess: “Let’s say an hour or so. Can we just carry him inside, set him on a couch perhaps?” Because the bastard deserves it for scaring him, he adds: “There’s very rarely any incontinence.”

Sherlock’s spasm of laughter emerges disguised as a convulsion.

John takes Sherlock’s shoulders, Jasper Cunningham his knees, and together they bear him into the big sun room on the ground floor. There’s the eastern exposure Sam Pope mentioned; the room is almost too warm on this March-brisk day. John aims them toward a comfortable-looking sofa — but “Wait, wait,” Alistair Cunningham interjects, and from a closet produces a piece of painter’s sheeting, which he lays over the upholstery with a moue of distaste. “In case of the … incontinence.”

“Good thinking,” John says cheerfully. On the plastic-draped sofa, Sherlock rustles and glares; John makes himself look grave and pretends to take his pulse again.

“Is there anything we can do?” Alistair Cunningham can’t quite mask his impatience.
“I’ll be right as rain in a few minutes,” Sherlock says weakly. Then, after a deep, effortful breath: “I wonder … perhaps you’d indulge me by going over the events again for my benefit?”

“We did give our statements to the police,” says Jasper.

“Of course, of course. … Only, it’s so much clearer when one can visualize things in situ, as it were.”

John resists the powerful temptation to pinch Sherlock. “In situ,” for God’s sake. “As it were.” He glances out at the lawn, because he doesn’t dare look at Barwood, who despite that slip earlier isn’t stupid — she hasn’t said one more word about what evidence it is the police might recover, and he would bet a tenner she knows Sherlock is shamming.

“All right, then.” It’s Jasper Cunningham. “I was working late in my office — it’s down the hall, but the windows face north. I heard a commotion in here — it must have been Tom catching the burglar in the act. The door to the garden was standing open. I looked out just in time to see Tom grab the guy. Average-size bloke, I can’t tell you much more about him. Too dark. But anyway, there was a fight. Just for a moment; then Tom fell, the thief took off running, and I jumped down the stairs to the garden and went to Tom. Couldn’t really see what had happened to him, but he sounded terrible, so I called 999. But … ” Jasper’s voice breaks. “He died.”

“And what did you see, Alistair?” Sherlock sounds like a social worker, John thinks. A peer counselor or something. Soothing, a bit dim.

“I was upstairs, reading in bed. I’m something of an early bird, so I don’t mind the morning light, and my bedroom’s on this side of the house. I heard shouting and came down just in time to see Jasper run out to the garden. I never saw the burglar, I’m afraid.”

“Tom Kirwan was working late, then, and on a Saturday night?”

Jasper Cunningham replies. “Yes, we had a shipment come in just short of our publication deadline, some fascinating Australian varietals we really wanted to review, so we had the tastings yesterday and we were finishing up the copy. I was writing and Tom was editing — working as fast as we could.”

“It’s a family project, isn’t it — The Wine Review? But you weren’t working, Alistair? You must have got your bit done already, then.”

“Ah, I’m an old fellow, Sherlock. I can’t keep the hours these young ones manage, deadline or no deadline.”

“Of course.”

Everyone is quiet for a space. Sherlock says, “John, I feel able to sit up now. Would you help me, please?” John lifts him upright with a hand on each biceps and takes the opportunity to whisper, “You are giving me the creeps.” Sherlock smiles benignly. “Thank you, John. I do appreciate it.” He glances around the room at large. “What an inept thief, though, wouldn’t you say?”

The Cunninghams assume inquiring expressions. Barwood has sat herself on a straight chair at the far end of the room; she rests her chin on her hand and watches Sherlock almost unblinkingly. John’s esteem for her keeps rising; Lestrade must have tutored her thoroughly, but even so — there aren’t many, even at the Met, who know when their best move is to sit back and let Sherlock just … detect.

“You” — Sherlock nods toward Jasper Cunningham — “were down the hall, and you” — Alistair — “were upstairs. And Mr. Kirwan was in here?”
Jasper Cunningham shakes his head. Is it John’s imagination, or has tension crept into the set of his mouth? “No, Tom was in his office, just there.” He points to a door in the sun room’s west wall, away from the garden door.

“Mmm. So, all over the house, lights on, people home. What sort of burglar is it,” asks Sherlock, “who breaks into a house where the lights are on?”

“He must’ve been desperate,” Alistair Cunningham says. “A junkie, someone of that sort.” John blinks, but Sherlock doesn’t — nowhere is that minute, telling flinch John saw in the morgue at Barts, over the body of Stuart Goldensohn. Yes, yes, yes, I am your ally, always your ally, he thinks. And you know it, now. Pleasure, affection, pride well up in him.

“Anyway” — this is Jasper — “he didn’t actually get in, he only had time to force the lock.”

“Oh! I wasn’t aware you knew he wasn’t in the house.”

“Well, Tom must have interrupted him before he actually got in. I mean, wouldn’t he have taken something, if he’d got that far?”

“Taken something … I suppose so. Or gotten rid of something,” says Sherlock, as if musing idly. “He’s a bit of an odd duck, isn’t he? Look at what he stole from the last place. What was it, D.C. Barwood? A tablecloth? A Japanese lucky cat. Strange choices for a desperate junkie, I’d say.” He comes down hard on the terminal consonants; the back of John’s neck is prickling.

Barwood says, “Yes, that’s right. And a remote for the telly.”

Sherlock presses his lips together and gives a little nod. “Yes, the remote, of course. Which reminds me, I’ve got to send a text to my own PA, and I noticed earlier my battery had run down. Could I possibly borrow your phone for a moment, Jasper?”

Jasper is visibly put out. “What about your colleague, there, can’t you use his?” Can’t be arsed to remember my name, can you? John thinks. The more time he and Sherlock spend with these two, the less he likes them; “fishy” doesn’t begin to cover it.

“I keep telling him to get a better plan — he hasn’t had service since we got out here yesterday. Ridiculous.”

John tries to channel Baldrick. (Has Sherlock ever seen Blackadder? He makes a mental note to put Series 2 on the agenda for their next dinner.)

Sherlock fiddles with Jasper’s phone. And fiddles. And fiddles. He reminds John of nothing so much as himself trying to send a text, all thumbs and cursing at the autocorrect. “There!” he says at last, and hands back the phone. “All set. Thanks ever so.”

Oh, no, Sherlock, that had to be over the top. But the Cunninghams seem to see nothing but a genial idiot who’s getting on their last nerve.

A grudging “You’re welcome, of course,” from Jasper, and then Sherlock is clapping his hands to his thighs and standing, just shakily enough for credibility. “And now would you perhaps show me round? I’d like to walk over the house with you, see if anything strikes you as unusual or out of place.”

It’s Alistair who protests this time: “We’ve already told the police nothing’s missing. And as Jasper told you, the thief doesn’t seem even to have got in before Tom went after him.”
“Still — such an odd thief. You never know what he might’ve been up to. Perhaps there was an accomplice, who got in and out unnoticed in all the fuss.” God, how can Sherlock sustain this persona for so long? But John’s neck prickles again: at the mention of an accomplice, Jasper Cunningham looks decidedly relieved.

“It’s not at all a bad idea,” D.C. Barwood puts in, rising. “While you’re doing that, I’ll have a second look at the grounds, see if the team earlier might have missed any sign of entry.” She shuts the garden door behind her softly; John can hear how the forced lock doesn’t quite latch.

The Cunninghams stand looking at Sherlock; Sherlock looks back.

“Very well,” says Alistair Cunningham, and turns. “As you’ve seen, Jasper’s office is down the hall here …”

The tour that follows is unspeakably dull, a string of “And this is the …”s from the Cunninghams and “Mm-hm”s from Sherlock. Alistair and Jasper both seem near snarling by the time they reach Alistair’s bedroom on the first floor, where all at once the tedium is broken.

On a stand just inside the room, to the left of the door, is a vase full of — camellias, John thinks they are. And in an instant when both Cunninghams are turned away, Sherlock sweeps the vase to the floor, shattering it, sending water, flower, shards of porcelain everywhere. “Oh, John! Such a lovely vase, and you broke it!” Sherlock cries.

What?

Dumbfounded, John begins picking up the bits of porcelain and trying to gather the flowers into a bundle for rescue. He glances up to see Alistair staring at him, pale with rage. “I’m very sorry,” John says, hoping he’s guessed correctly at his role. “I’ve got no idea how I managed to knock that down. Please, let me hand you the flowers at least, you can put them in another vase— ” He’s interrupted by a muttered curse; then Jasper Cunningham is out the bedroom door and clattering down the stairs, with Alistair not far behind him. John gets to his feet. “Sherlock, what— ”

Sherlock is gone, too. *He’s like a bloody cat, how did I not hear him go?*

“John!”

*Sherlock.*

In terror and pain.

John has hit the ground-floor landing before he’s even aware of taking the stairs, *pivot* left, down the short hall, one hand at the small of his back, grabbing his gun, head down, good shoulder forward, *slam* through the closed door of Jasper Cunningham’s office, gun up, launching himself with what he dimly recognizes as a roar at the younger Cunningham and sending him sprawling then *pivot* again toward the father and *slam* so satisfying the gun butt into the back of his head so that he drops wordless and then, heaving for breath, a knee in Jasper Cunningham’s back with the barrel to his neck and “*Move and I will fucking shoot you dead you bastard he had better be all right.*”

“No, that’s— ” He is looking around the room urgently, John doesn’t understand why at first, not till Sherlock seizes a brass candlestick with a wide, heavy base and thrusts it at him, at the same time taking hold of his gun by the barrel.

“Safety,” John whispers, coming to his senses. Sherlock lets go; John engages the safety and hands Sherlock the gun, grip first, then presses the barrel of the candlestick against Jasper Cunningham’s neck. Sherlock wipes down the gun — his shirt is torn, John notices now — and tucks it into the
small of his back. They grin at each other.

“All right?” John says, softly. Sherlock bites his lip, closes his eyes, nods. They can hear running footsteps: Barwood, thankfully just a moment too late, and two PCs just behind her.

“He had a gun!” cries Jasper Cunningham. “I think he’s killed my father.”

John holds up the candlestick in what he hopes is an informative manner, then sets it on the floor.

“There’s an ambulance on the way,” Barwood replies calmly. “Meanwhile, however, I am arresting you, Jasper Cunningham, on suspicion of murder in the death of Tom Kirwan . . .”

* *

“The first obvious clue was, naturally, the burglary at Evander Acton’s.” Sherlock is not so hoarse that one can’t hear him preening. Barwood grimaces, but really, John thinks, she’s taken Sherlock’s hijacking of her case, and his evisceration of the Surrey police, rather well, perhaps soothed by the excellent whiskey Sam Pope has poured them all out of his boss’s stock. “Burglars looking for something else and trying to make their break-in look like ‘an adolescent prank’” — here he curls his lip at John — “or like one of the already established string.

“I Googled Evander Acton and learned that he runs a small but well-respected computer consultancy, recovering files from corrupted hard drives and so on. It was easy to imagine what sorts of information he might discover — adultery; tax fraud; double bookkeeping: the list is endless. I thought he might have been blackmailing someone. That proved not to be the case, of course.

“Then, Kirwan’s murder. That was interesting.”

I am really going to have to explain to him someday why people are put off when he describes a murder as “interesting.”

“The iPhone. Now, a thief might well grab an iPhone — the secondary market is full of stolen electronics — and then perhaps drop it in his hasty escape. But when would he have had time to get it? We were assured by our chief witness, young Mr. Cunningham, that the struggle between Kirwan and the burglar was brief. Did the burglar pick his pocket while stabbing him? It seemed unlikely. This is to say nothing of how unusual it is for a criminal to graduate from house burglary to outright murder in the space of twenty-four hours.

“When Detective Constable Barwood revealed that the texts and call record from the hours before the murder had been deleted, well, then it was clearly Christmas.”

Note to self: to explanation of why not to call murders “interesting,” add subparagraph concerning comparisons with popular holidays. John takes another sip. The whiskey is delicious. No, it’s sublime. “Sublime” is the right word.

“Nothing about the episode made sense — if the Cunninghams were telling the truth, that is. Why would a burglar break into a house where at least three windows were lit, one overlooking the break-in point and the other two on the ground floor? Answer: he wouldn’t, because there was no burglar. Eliminate the burglar, and everything else falls into place. The Cunninghams’ house is hardly isolated — an ambulance could arrive within ten minutes. Kirwan’s wound shouldn’t have killed him if Jasper Cunningham had indeed called 999 immediately. But he didn’t: he stabbed Kirwan, deleted the texts and call record from the iPhone, broke the lock on the garden door, and then waited till he was sure Kirwan was beyond saving, at which point he called emergency services.

“Fortunately, as long as an iPhone hasn’t been synched in the meantime, deleted texts can be
recovered. You, Detective Constable, were about to spill those beans when I coincidentally had my attack of — what was it, John?"

"Hereditary autoimmune myoclonus." John raises his glass.

"Yes, thank you. An unusual condition, which only the most expert of medical professionals are able to diagnose on the fly. No thanks for that appalling plastic sheet, Dr. Watson.

"While I lay indisposed, I borrowed Jasper Cunningham’s phone to text my nonexistent PA. It’s marvelous how difficult even a villain finds it to refuse a direct request, isn’t it? While fumbling with the keyboard I happened to discover that Cunningham hadn’t texted, emailed, or phoned his PA in the past day and a half, and nor had his PA contacted him. Improbable in the extreme, even if they really had been working in close physical proximity because of the imminent deadline; there must therefore be another phone, used for communicating with Kirwan.

"This raised two questions. First, why wasn’t Jasper Cunningham using his regular phone, and second, where was the other? The answer to the second would obviously provide us with the answer to the first. As would any text messages recovered from Kirwan’s iPhone, but I wasn’t inclined to wait around for that, who knows whether the Surrey police IT department is any good. One learns not to count on such things."

Barwood opens her mouth to speak, then thinks better of it and takes another slug of the whiskey. John tips his glass at her. "Don’t feel bad, this is how he treats everyone at the Met."

Sherlock glares at John, but the corner of his mouth twitches up.

"I suspected that there hadn’t been any last-minute shipment of Australian varietals at all, but that Kirwan had come last night expressly to meet Jasper Cunningham and discuss … what? What, in particular, that would lead to murder? It seemed unlikely that they were either lovers or rivals. My admittedly hasty research on the principals during the drive here suggested that Kirwan was gay, while Jasper Cunningham had a string of girlfriends, of the sort that used to be called pneumatic. Not lovers, not rivals — I was back to the idea of some sort of professional blackmail.

"Oh, you’re wondering how I knew Jasper and not Alistair was the killer. To begin with, both father and son agreed that Jasper was outside with Kirwan; not being altogether stupid, they would have stuck as close to the truth as possible. Jasper’s being with Kirwan after the stabbing would account for any trace evidence and, of course, blood on Jasper’s clothes and skin. There was little enough of that anyway — he must have seized Kirwan from behind and stabbed him. Also, Alistair was not in complete control of his demeanor; he glanced at Jasper every few seconds. Worried. Protective. Jasper did the killing, and then he and Alistair together came up with the cover story. Fatherly love. Touching, really.

"Back to the missing phone. Jasper wouldn’t have had a chance to dispose of it yet, too many police swarming about, so it had to be somewhere in the house. His office seemed the likeliest place. Thanks to John’s demolition of the vase in Alistair’s bedroom” — Sherlock smirks at him — “I was able to slip downstairs and conduct a quick search. There the phone was, right in the top desk drawer. Unfortunately, Jasper was not far behind me, and Alistair not far behind him. Fortunately, John is better at handling candlesticks than at leaving intact attractive arrangements of camellias.

"The only thing left to learn was the nature of the blackmail, and how the burglary at Acton’s fit in with it. The Wine Review is, or now we must say was, a preeminent tastemaker in the high-end wine market. Prestige, sadly, did not equate with profitability. Jasper Cunningham had been accepting bribes in exchange for taking a friendly attitude toward the output of certain vineyards. Scandalous.
“Evander Acton found out from files on a corrupted hard drive Jasper sent him to work on. He told Jasper he planned to bring the information to a friend at the Times. Goodbye Wine Review, goodbye lovely home, goodbye reputation and all prospect of future oenophilic employment. However, Jasper managed to convince Acton that the evidence of bribery was really notes for a novel about chicanery in the international wine markets. Not a sure best-seller, one would think, but Acton fell for the story. Meanwhile, however, Alistair tried to steal the hard drive back. He’s not much on modern technology, our Alistair — he still doesn’t seem to quite understand that data can exist in more than one digital location and that the attempt was pointless because Acton had backed up the incriminating files. In any case, he didn’t find the hard drive, so in its stead he gathered up that whimsical assortment we all now know by heart. Acton, who seems to be almost as naïve as Alistair in his own way, took the theft for what John has called an adolescent prank.

“And now we come to Thomas Kirwan. He somehow found out about the exchange between Jasper and Evander Acton, but was less easily snookered than the latter, and he saw his chance at blackmail. Using the spare phone, Jasper arranged to meet him in the garden last night and make a payment, but instead ambushed and stabbed him. While Kirwan lay dying, Jasper deleted from his iPhone the records of their recent exchanges and tossed the phone aside. Typical amateur bumbling, really — ‘Oh, it’ll all look as if an intruder did it if things are tossed about.’ Full marks for coldbloodedness, of course. Then he called 999 and he and Alistair broke the lock on the garden door and concocted the Tale of the Inept Burglar. The End.”

By the end of this recitation Barwood is grinning. “Well, Mr. Holmes, you’re everything Inspector Lestrade said you were, and more. We’re very grateful to you for your help.” She stands and stretches out her back; John can hear it pop from where he sits. “It’s been a hell of a day and I’ll be dining out on it for a while, I think. I’ve got to get myself home if I’m to have a hope of getting through the paperwork tomorrow, but I hope you’ll visit us again some time.”

Sherlock looks almost … flustered. Of course: he’s used to Anderson and Donovan, to everyone at the Met but Lestrade treating his deductive feats like a useful but potentially malignant sideshow. Honest admiration took him aback the first time he got it from John, and it hasn’t stopped surprising him yet. But Barwood knows only what Lestrade told her and what she herself has seen: Sherlock arrogant in his brilliance, eager for praise, “a consulting detective — the only one in the world.” “You’ll be asking for his autograph next,” John teases her, to clue Sherlock in, and is rewarded by seeing his small, real smile and awkward nod to her.

* * *

All through his exposition of Kirwan’s murder, Sherlock enjoyed the usual giddiness, the pouncing satisfaction of seeing what others don’t, putting together elements of a puzzle that had eluded them. Barwood would have gotten to the bottom of the case once the data was recovered from Kirwan’s phone, but Sherlock was faster, as always, exhilaratingly fast.

But when Barwood has left and Sam Pope has disappeared into the greenhouse, weaving a bit what with all the whiskey, Sherlock finds himself feeling … strange. He wishes that Barwood had stayed to the bottom of the case once the data was recovered from Kirwan’s phone, but Sherlock was faster, as always, exhilaratingly fast.

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Cunningham’s continued insistence that John had had a gun.

Now he retrieves the gun and shoves it at John, suddenly angry. “Why did you keep it?”

John doesn’t respond at first. He turns the Sig over in his hands once, twice; checks the safety, empties the chamber, tucks the weapon back in his waistband and puts the bullets in his pocket. “I didn’t — I mean, it’s not the same one I had over there. It was a mate’s. He smuggled his out, fancied he was spending a bit too much time thinking about it, gave it me for safekeeping.”

Sherlock doesn’t care one way or the other about the potentially suicidal army mate. “You don’t carry the gun in London,” he informs John, “yet you brought it along on a rural holiday. You perceive more danger in the countryside than in the city. Why?”

“Stupid, isn’t it? I suppose because it’s darker here. Fewer people about. A person could shout for help a long time and not be heard.”

Sherlock is sitting next to Jim; they touch when Sherlock passes the salt, and Sherlock flinches. Mycroft hesitates, looks down, takes another forkful of gnocchi with pesto. Sherlock speaks without thinking: “People are well able to remain oblivious despite almost any degree of proximity.” John’s glance in return is sharp, discomfiting: Sherlock has given something away. A tendril of shame and panic winds through him. The idea that John might discover what Sherlock has been, what he has done, is insupportable. Sherlock forces his face blank and turns toward another thought: army medical personnel aren’t supposed to engage in combat, but John had put both Cunninghams out of the fight before they knew there was a fight. Where did he learn hand-to-hand? But this leads direct to “Move and I will fucking shoot you dead you bastard he had better be all right.” John ferocious, standing over Jasper Cunningham. No time at all had seemed to pass between Sherlock’s cry and the moment when John burst through the locked office door.

Sherlock was afraid. When Sherlock was afraid, he called John’s name. This is too much, Sherlock is too far off balance; why did he even start this conversation? He bolts for refuge: “So you’re superstitious about the countryside — which, I hasten to point out, it was your idea to visit. You bring with you an illegal weapon whose mere possession could land you in prison, you conceal it on your person while visiting a murder scene, and then you use it to threaten a man whom you have already subdued. You’re clearly more of an idiot than I had supposed.”

John is meant to snap back at this, he must snap back; Sherlock can hear his voice on a loop in his head — “fucking shoot you dead you bastard he had better be all right,” “fucking shoot you dead you bastard he had better be all right,” the protective rage of— of— but Sherlock can think no further than this, if John would just take offense then Sherlock could push him and push him and be rid of him finally—

But John says, mildly, “Ah, I expect they’d go easy on a decorated and semi-disabled veteran, don’t you? Come on, let’s catch the next train. Baker Street’s looking peaceful right about now.”

Neither of them notices that John is thinking of Baker Street as of home for them both.

* *

John is quiet on the train, reading his stupid mystery, or pretending to. Sherlock is pretending as well, eyes on his phone, tapping the keys as if texting, as if doing Web searches, as if, as if, as if. He wants to get up and vault over the seats and out the door; he wishes he were in a crowd so that he could shove his way through it. He had better be all right. John’s voice had not been loud. It was a voice of stone. Sherlock had been afraid and had called for John. He had better be all right. Sherlock shoves his phone into his pocket and folds himself up around his knees. John watches him, frowns a
little, closes up his book, opens his mouth to speak but thinks better of it; Sherlock watches all this out of the corner of his eye, silently.

They have been sitting facing each other; now John gets up and takes the seat next to Sherlock. He doesn’t speak or touch Sherlock but simply sits there. Sherlock imagines (he knows it must be his imagination) that he can feel against his skin the entire boundary of John, as if he himself were a device, a John detector, covered with invisible hypersensitive ciliae all of which are alert to John, swaying toward him—Intolerable. He wants John to move away from him. He wants nothing less in the world. If John moves, Sherlock will fly apart, like an IED with nails in. John persists in sitting quietly next to Sherlock, reading his book, being both unbearable and the only thing that makes this experience, whatever it is, bearable at all. Sherlock pulls at his hair.

Sherlock unsettled is not new. There was the night of their first case, when he nearly fled rather than let John tend his burned hand. There was the time when he thought John believed he was still shooting coke. (Sherlock’s fury and shame have branded themselves on John’s heart.) Many other times, times when he seemed to think their friendship had ended, an outcome that was clearly what he expected all along. But John has always been able to work out the source of the problem—“work out” isn’t even the right phrase, he thinks now, because what was wrong has always been obvious to him. Today is different. Sherlock had been frightened, there was that, but in John’s experience Sherlock gravitates toward danger and whatever he feels in a moment of real peril, afterward he bounces back fast and always seems exhilarated. He registered, well before John did, the need to cover up for his gun — John had been far too consumed with the imperative to protect Sherlock to think about a little thing like avoiding his own arrest. Sherlock had seemed entirely like himself, in fact, right up to the moment when Barwood and Pope were gone and the two of them were alone. And then he started picking at John, and there was that flare of real anger about John’s admittedly silly city-fellow-in-the-greenwood perceptions; John worked out about half an hour after meeting him that Sherlock disdainful and mocking is just Sherlock, endlessly entertaining if you choose not to take offense, while Sherlock lashing out is Sherlock in real distress … but what is the source of his distress? John has nothing to go on but the vague sense that it would be a mistake to back away. Perhaps it’s best if he puts on all his padding and lets Sherlock jab at him and shove him until whatever this is has passed.

By the time their train reaches London John is feeling the effects of his double takedown of the Cunninghams and the afternoon-long anxiety over whether Sherlock had sufficiently hidden the gun. Bad enough for himself, though he’d made light of the risk, but the thought of Sherlock being arrested makes him feel sick and he’s been cursing himself for bringing the thing. He could have knocked down the Cunninghams on protective rage alone. And then, to protect John, Sherlock let Barwood see his braces, about which he is normally so secretive, even ashamed. …

They take a cab from Victoria to Baker Street, Sherlock jittering all the way. Mrs. Hudson isn’t home: too bad, John thinks, because she has a trick of patting Sherlock on the shoulder until he shouts at her, at which she delivers something halfway between a chastisement and an endearment and his strop evaporates. Under the dyed curls is a cool head; John once told her she should have trained for bomb disposal, meaning it, which pleased her no end. “Spring rolls and lo mein all right with you?” he asks Sherlock, who has managed to hang up his coat and scarf and is now climbing out of his skin while contriving to sit perfectly still on the sofa and not utter a word, though he does nod, absenty. John adds some orange chicken to his mental list and heads down the street for the food. He might have called for delivery but he needs the chill air and a few minutes alone to sort himself out, what with the being-in-love problem and the agitated-Sherlock problem and (waiting for
his order, he almost thumps his head against the wall over this one) the sudden realization that he didn’t even ask Sherlock before taking the apartment key out of his coat pocket: all the assumptions of intimacy he makes without a thought. That Sherlock is his to tend. That he was coming back to Baker Street with Sherlock this evening. That they’d have dinner together even though it isn’t one of their usual nights and even though, if Sherlock were any other mate, John would have waved goodbye and taken the tube back to his own place. He can’t even list all the large ways and the trivial ways his life has woven itself together with Sherlock’s. He doesn’t have words to express how much he enjoys Sherlock’s company and his sarcasm and his tentative happiness and the sight and sound of him curled to his violin. Right now John is sitting in a not-great-but-conveniently-located cheap restaurant with steamy windows and Sherlock is the love of his life and the clerk has been calling to him for God knows how long to tell him his order is ready. All right. All right.

*  

John went to Big Chow Fun. John doesn’t like Big Chow Fun as much as he likes Green Pavilion, but Green Pavilion is farther away and can be slow to deliver. Seventeen minutes passed between John’s putting on his jacket to fetch the food and John’s returning with a heavy carrier bag. Seventeen minutes, seventeen steps from the street to the flat. John puts the food in front of Sherlock on a plate along with chopsticks. There are not seventeen pieces of chicken in his portion of orange chicken but the chicken is reasonably tender and he can break some of the pieces apart with his chopsticks so that they total seventeen. Sherlock is more than adept with chopsticks and could easily pick out seventeen grains of rice and set them at the side of his plate so as to enjoy their seventeenness.

Sherlock begins listing primes in his head. He starts from the beginning (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 …) because that is most soothing, even though the smallest prime numbers don’t please him as much — an irrational preference he has tried, without success, to move beyond (… 17, 19 … the twin primes seem to orbit around each other, as twinned stars do; he had begun reading about astronomy in the face of John’s indignation at his ignorance, why was that — ). He has lost his train of thought.

Twinned stars in mutual orbit. Sentiment. 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13 …

*  

Whatever Sherlock’s doing in the fastnesses of his mind, it seems to help. The sweep of his hands smooths and slows. The line of his torso softens against the back of the couch. Not least, having arranged the food on his plate in some pattern inscrutable to John, then stared at it long enough for most people to go on to seconds, he begins to eat. Having eaten, he gazes longingly at his laptop in its case, set down by the door as they came in, until John calls him a lazy git and, on his way back from the kitchen because of course he, not Sherlock, has bused their plates, picks it up and tosses it into Sherlock’s lap. “That sort of behavior, John, is precisely why I never scrimp on a laptop case,” says the lazy git. A moment later, he is reading the current issue of the Journal of Forensic Sciences, for which he has paid not a single pound’s subscription fee in his entire life.

“That’s criminal behavior right there, that is,” John points out, just for the look of disbelief it gets him, and then returns to his mystery. He has to backtrack about fifty pages because he remembers nothing he read on the train, but he’s quickly absorbed, playing guessing games with himself about what the killer’s motive will turn out to be.

*  

It’s quiet. Sherlock’s flat, just one story up, gets all the street noise even when, as on a March night when the tenant hasn’t been experimenting with anything smelly, the rattly old windows are shut.
John wakes only because the quiet has been disturbed by some drunk, singing as he passes. More power to him for sounding genuinely festive, John thinks: so probably not an alcoholic like Harry, for whom all the joy has gone out of liquor now that she’s well shackled by it, but an occasional and real celebrant. All this comes to him in the moments of rising out of sleep, and then, *How do I pick all this stuff up from him, without even trying?*

The him in question is sleeping too. Sleeping hard: his laptop has slid onto the couch next to him, screen black. One pale hand rests on the keyboard; Sherlock’s cheek is pressed into the back cushion, his other hand curled in his bosom. He isn’t often peaceful when awake — strike that: John has never before seen him look peaceful at all. Interested, alert, happy, curious, angry, disdainful, smug, even startled; even wounded. But never safe and at peace. John wants —

Well, fuck that. It doesn’t matter what he wants. He levers himself out of the chair and cracks his neck. Turns the light out so it doesn’t wake Sherlock; the room is full of moonlight, anyway. His mouth tastes foul from falling asleep with it hanging open after a garlicky meal, so he heads for the loo and scrubs his teeth with a finger of Sherlock’s toothpaste. He feels a bit strange about going into Sherlock’s bedroom though his errand is the innocent one of fetching a blanket so that even if Sherlock wakes with his neck cricked, at least he won’t be cold. John isn’t about to wake him, not when he’s heard twenty times if he’s heard once how Sherlock never sleeps when a case is on (and looks it, too, as John has told him twenty times if he’s told him once).

The bedroom surprises him. Spare, neat. Uninhabited, if you like. A chart of the periodic table on one wall. A frame, certificate-size, is stood on the floor, face to the wall. Tempting to turn it, see what Sherlock has set aside but not discarded — not brought himself to part with? Sherlock says so little about his past; John’s mental file folder looks like a parody of an old-fashioned ransom note, disconnected phrases, dates, names arranged on the page so as to make sense though not, probably, the sense originally intended. John eyes the frame for a moment, wondering, then takes the blanket off the foot of the bed. No surprise, given Sherlock’s luxurious and beautiful clothing, that whatever it’s woven of feels as soft as an air kiss — considerably warmer, though. Impossible not to imagine it against bare skin.

Sherlock hasn’t stirred. Cautiously John slides the laptop out from under his hand and sets it on the coffee table. No noise. He doesn’t even click the lid shut; a little recharging time won’t kill anybody, he thinks wryly. He unfolds the blanket and, as quiet and slow as he can manage, lays the far edge along Sherlock’s shoulder, his side, behind his crooked-up knee; makes sure Sherlock’s big pale feet are covered. It was a long day and there’s a hint of pong that makes John smile; you couldn’t rightly call the man fastidious, when he cheerfully gets up close and personal with cadavers of any age and provenance whatever, but even when he gripes about taking time to eat Sherlock will find forty minutes for a shower. John has waited on him often enough to know it —

Sherlock is awake.

John’s mouth opens and words begin to fall out: “Ah, hello. You were, ah, asleep. I thought, I thought I’d just fetch a blanket, brought this one from your room, figured you probably wouldn’t mind, it’s bloody cold out here in the middle of the night. Lovely blanket this, feels like a bit of heaven. I’ve never felt wool so soft, it …”

The stream dries as quickly as it sprang up.

Sherlock hasn’t sat up or moved away; John stupidly begins tucking in the near edge of the blanket, not looking at him. He feels about fourteen years old. “John,” Sherlock says. His voice is deep and rough with sleep. His gaze, when John brings himself to meet it, is curious and intent. John exercises no conscious volition over the hand that rises to cup itself against Sherlock’s cheek; he bends to
Sherlock’s mouth as a metal bar softened by the blacksmith’s flame might curve itself in the direction chosen for it. He has been saying no, no, no, no, no for months; now, tired, sleepy, full of the feeling of the soft wool in his hands, still alive with the imperative to protect (to claim), he has no more no left, none, none at all. Sherlock’s mouth is dense and succulent, a plum opening at its seam — “Oh,” John says into that mouth, “oh, Sherlock, I can’t”; Sherlock lifts the hand that was curled on his breast and lightly, with just the tips of his fingers, touches at John’s cheek, the side of his neck, his hair; settles at John’s shoulder, patting restlessly as their mouths press together. John tucks himself into the space Sherlock’s hips leave at the edge of the couch and runs his hand up Sherlock’s side, over the blanket that seems to be made of feathers or mist, takes Sherlock’s hand, breaks their kiss to kiss Sherlock’s fingertips, the base of his thumb, his palm, his wrist. Sherlock’s other hand keeps stroking John’s shoulder and his hair, patting at it. “Please,” John says, “you’re so — Please, let me take you to bed.” The air feels enormous, as though an explosion has sent all its molecules rocketing into infinite space.

Sherlock presses his forehead into John’s shoulder and once, twice, three times, he nods.

Chapter End Notes

The line John remembers is from W. H. Auden’s “First Things First.” I misremembered it when first drafting this chapter as “Millions have lived without love …” When I checked and found it was only “Thousands …,” it occurred to me to wonder what Auden meant. The line is often taken to signify that however painful it is to live without love, love is inessential. But if only “thousands” have lived without love, then perhaps love is essential to almost everyone. Poor John.
If we live to see the other side of this

Chapter Summary

The incubus.

Chapter Notes

Title from the Mountain Goats, "Dilaudid."

Thankfully, John doesn’t ask whether Sherlock has ever done this before. Sherlock suspects the answer is no, hopes the answer is no, because yes would mean that this is what he did with Jim; hopes the answer is yes, because otherwise he has no idea what to expect. He reminds himself that the mechanics will be more or less familiar. Won’t they? But — he had nodded into John’s shoulder, and then John’s left hand stroked the back of Sherlock’s head, twining through his hair, while with his right arm John reached around Sherlock’s shoulders and pressed Sherlock into himself. That happened, and now John’s lips are against Sherlock’s right temple and Sherlock can feel a vibration in John’s throat and chest: is he … murmuring? Yes, that. Sherlock experiences a reciprocal urge to draw John toward him, so he cautiously puts his arms around John also.

Now what?

Sherlock is unable to formulate much of a hypothesis. Presumably they will soon go to Sherlock’s bedroom, which means they’ll have to stand up and walk. Jim did not make it a practice to kiss Sherlock or to embrace him. Sherlock feels the warmth of John’s hands on his body pass deeply into him, an illusion accompanied by a sensation at once elated and tranquil. Also illusory? Sherlock does not know. He thinks of Jim ordering him to strip, and a wave of arousal almost makes him rock his hips, but he suppresses the image and also, even as it forms itself, the breathtaking thought John could do that. He can’t suppress the gasp that comes with the thought. John pulls his head back and smiles at Sherlock. “Quick off the mark, are we?” He kisses Sherlock’s mouth again at once, so it must be acceptable that Sherlock is already so greatly aroused. His penis is uncomfortable, too swollen for the space trousers allot. He shifts on the couch. John breaks the kiss and strokes Sherlock’s sides and back through the blanket and his clothes, up and down, clears his throat. “Do you — I’m thinking we might head for the actual, literal bed about now, what do you think?”

The right answer to this question is surely yes. “Yes,” Sherlock therefore says.

“Too bad about having to walk. Still, worth it in the end, yeah?” John winces a little as he straightens up; in the moonlight Sherlock can see that he also has an erection. Sherlock’s breath feels short; before he can think, he reaches out and lays the palm of his hand against the fabric that covers the base of John’s penis. John sucks in a breath and closes his eyes, brings his own hand over Sherlock’s and caresses the back before lifting Sherlock’s hand off his crotch and tugging gently upward. “Come on, then, or my end of this evening will be drawing to a close well before time.” He smiles down at Sherlock (again!) as if this were any other conversation and he were making a joke. Is he
angry at Sherlock for touching his penis? His tone and expression match nothing under the rubric “Annoyance, Anger, Fury” in Sherlock’s interior catalogue, nor has Sherlock ever identified a moment when John shammed humor when angry, though he will use humor, Sherlock has observed, to attempt to defuse a situation that makes him uneasy—Perhaps John believes that he will seem inadequate or incompetent if he orgasms quickly. Yes, that must be it. Great relief at this. Sherlock can use it. He can observe John and identify means of boosting his self-evaluation, which will make sex with Sherlock more satisfying to John, and then—

“You still with me?” John is saying, with the vertical lines between his eyebrows that signify Worry.

“Yes, don’t be absurd, where else would I be,” Sherlock replies, scornfully (John always seems to enjoy Sherlock’s scornful tone), and forces himself to stand up, sliding against John’s body as he does so. Trying to remember things Jim used to like, while at the same time not remembering, exactly, Jim, may prove difficult but must be managed, so as to make a success of this business. John has closed his eyes again for an instant and made a small, gratifying noise, so Sherlock is clearly on the right track. What next? Yes, yes: he hooks a finger between the buttons of John’s shirt and tugs him closer, the idea being that he, Sherlock, will step backward, John forward, Sherlock backward, and thus Sherlock will draw John smoothly into the bedroom.

“God. You in the moonlight. With your hair.” This is incomprehensible. John’s hand is at Sherlock’s lips, stroking at the corner of his mouth, around his jaw, coming to rest at the back of his head as it did before, when John first kissed him, and Sherlock feels his head tilt forward and his mouth fall slightly open (“You look idiotic,” Jim’s voice is saying in his ear) as John stretches up to kiss him again, now with something frantic in the movement of his lips against Sherlock’s, one hand clutching Sherlock’s hair, even pulling a little, the other hand firm against the undercurve of Sherlock’s buttocks, pushing Sherlock up and toward John’s hips, Sherlock’s penis higher than John’s; he can feel John’s erection against his thigh and he must surely be leaking now, in a moment John will notice and— No, no. That was Jim, not John. John says, “You are so gorgeous, you’re so hot, how on earth do you expect me to get all the way to the bedroom with you? I want to pull you down and have you right here, Sherlock, I want to make you feel so good, I don’t think you do this very often, I want to make you feel so good, I don’t think you do this very often, I want to make you feel it from me, go on with you then, go—” and instead of Sherlock pulling John forward, John is walking Sherlock backward, left hand on Sherlock’s right arm, right hand at his left hipbone, John’s face as intent as it was on their first case when he bandaged Sherlock’s hand in the bathroom of the Thai restaurant, why is Sherlock remembering that now, and then his bedroom door slams open behind him and he is falling backward onto his bed and John is on top of him and John says, “There. At last. I’m going to take your shirt off now, Sherlock, do you know what it does to me when we’re out somewhere and I can see your nipples under your shirt, do you?”

John has strong hands. He runs them down along Sherlock’s arms, to the wrists, draws Sherlock’s arms up and holds them together above Sherlock’s head: “Stay like that. Will you stay like that for me, will you, will you let me make you naked for me, Sherlock?” Sherlock can feel his mouth falling open again and struggles not to let a noise emerge, but he nods, sharply, staring wide-eyed at John, who now draws his hands back along Sherlock’s arms and to his shirt placket. He undoes a button, kisses Sherlock’s mouth lightly; undoes another button and licks at Sherlock’s parted lips; undoes a third and draws Sherlock’s lower lip between his own lips and suckles at it; then pauses to draw his jumper over his head and undo his shirt and shuck that as well.

The scar. Sherlock has never seen John’s scar before. Properly, two sets of scars: that from the bullet wound, and then the long, neat arch of the incision through which the shoulder replacement was performed. On either side of the incision, parcelling it, are the dots left by surgical staples. Sherlock’s heart twists and before he can stop himself he has risen up and pressed his mouth against the spot where the incision crosses the entry wound. The skin is ridged and bright pinkish brown, superficially hard, but (Sherlock knows everything there is to know about how wounds heal: he
needs to know, for the Work) still new enough to be tender; less than a year has passed since John was shot, broken and then repaired again. It would hurt him if Sherlock were to push against either scar in a concentrated way, with his fingertips for example. This thought is extraordinarily unpleasant. Sherlock dares a glance at John’s face and sees that he is watching Sherlock gravely. “All right?” John says.

“Yes, I—yes,” Sherlock replies. It was hard to look at John, and now he can’t take his eyes away. John brings his right hand to Sherlock’s chest and exerts the slightest possible force: *Down.* Sherlock’s pulse picks up hard and he lets himself fall to the bed again. “Arms?” John makes it a question. Sherlock remembers in his muscles exactly how John had placed him before; he replicates the position. In his head is a clamor of *Please, please, please,* the urgency to remain quiet and obedient for John so that John can, can *open me take me own me;* John undoes the last buttons of Sherlock’s shirt and spreads it around him, then sits back on his heels and runs his fingers along the outline of Sherlock’s erect penis in his trousers, first lightly, then firmly, then lightly again.

Sherlock’s mind is a flailing, an explosion, a tumble of leaves. John’s weight on him. John’s smell (is every variant familiar? this one is: underneath, clean, but at this moment overlaid with the day’s stale sweat; Sherlock craves it, just barely unpleasant as it is, but John’s smell and so desirable) (*Jim’s—* No, John’s hands on Sherlock’s head, forcing Sherlock openmouthed, open-throated, down onto his penis, where the smell must be stronger, more pungent, rougher—*No*).

John is opening Sherlock’s flies now, laying the sides apart as neatly and carefully as he did the sides of Sherlock’s shirt. He rubs Sherlock’s penis through his pants, using the heel of his hand to press just a little, making a rocking motion back and forth, till Sherlock’s hips twitch upward again. At this, John bows his head and watches his hands as they move back up along Sherlock’s sides, now tugging the shirt as he goes till Sherlock raises his torso enough for John to pull it over his shoulders and down his arms and off.

John takes Sherlock’s hands and replaces them above his head. That same gentleness. He draws simultaneous curves under the swell of Sherlock’s pectoral muscles and lowers his mouth to Sherlock’s left nipple, then his right, rubbing them hard with his tongue, sucking at them wetly. “Wait,” he says, “wait, I’ll be right back,” and gets up and shoves out of his trousers and pants. Sherlock looks: John’s penis is hard. (*Sturdy, neat,* Sherlock remembers thinking, one day months ago in the changing room at the physiotherapists’; then it was *irrelevant* but now it is so no longer.) John doesn’t shave or depilate himself, so although the patch of light-brown pubic hair stands out thicker against the hair of his belly and legs, it doesn’t present a sharp contrast. “Like it?” John asks, so confident, unself-conscious, and gives his own penis a pull that makes Sherlock throw his head back and pant. (*Jim says: “You’re completely out of control, aren’t you? You’d do anything for it,” and Sherlock cries, “Yes, oh please, Jim,” he wants it so much, wants the weight and the force and Jim kicks Sherlock’s legs apart while Sherlock kneels on the floor with his face pressed against the boards—*) John says, “Look at you, love, oh, look at you,” and climbs back onto the bed and drags Sherlock’s trousers and pants down; off.

“Braces,” John says. “Do they stay or go?” Sherlock knows what people think of battle wounds — what he himself thinks of John’s wound — and he has seen how people look, or don’t look, at men with canes, with walkers, sitting in wheelchairs with their withered legs slack under a blanket in front of them. The devices will only draw attention to the atrophy of his gastrocnemius muscles. “Off.” He makes his tone decisive, because he feels sick. (“*Feeble little thing, aren’t you?” Jim says.*)

John takes a moment to study the latches before he looses them, then sets the braces carefully on the floor beside the bed. He rubs at Sherlock’s calves, kisses the inside of his left knee. Why not the right? “What I’d like,” he says (his voice is urgent, and Sherlock can hear that his breath is coming fast now), “what I’d like, sometime, is to take off just your trousers, because I love the way your
cock looks hard under your pants, soaking them like you just did, and I want to see what you’d look like with your pants elastic tucked down behind your balls so they were pushed forward, and you sticking up hard and all wet,” and Sherlock watches him work his mouth to make a pool of saliva that he drops into his palm and rubs over the head of Sherlock’s naked, erect penis, “and I’d do exactly this, but then I’d rub your pants up and down over your cock, just a little rough, and then I’d do this,” and he rises up over Sherlock and puts his left hand under Sherlock’s head and his mouth on Sherlock’s mouth. With his right hand he pulls Sherlock’s left leg away from Sherlock’s right leg. “Ah, ah, ah,” Sherlock says. (Jim is sneering. “Beg me, pretty little slut, God you’re filthy. It’s disgusting, the way you wriggle like an invertebrate.”) John nuzzles the side of Sherlock’s neck, urges Sherlock’s chin up and back with little pushes of his lips (“It doesn’t take much,” Jim says, and Sherlock whines the way Jim likes him to), which makes Sherlock whine. John nips lightly, lightly at the hollow of Sherlock’s throat (Harder, harder, Sherlock wants to say, please, make it hurt, please); Sherlock’s hips buck, buck, buck. “Yeah,” John says, “yeah, that’s right.” He spits onto his palm again and reaches between them, takes hold of both his penis and Sherlock’s at once, squeezes gently (Harder, please, please; Jim says, “You like it rough, so that’s how you’re getting it, you tart”); Sherlock whimpers (Jim, it was so exciting with Jim, always so exciting, it was everything he had ever wanted, John would never do that, would never hurt him, never tell him how filthy he is, never slap his balls until he was coming and crying at the same time and could hardly bear to draw his pants on afterward); John is arched above him, stroking his spit and their precome down and over their penises together; with his eyes squeezed shut, Sherlock forces himself to think John John John pretending his buttocks are welted hot and red his arms twisted behind him Jim’s cock fat in his anus shoving shoving Jim’s teeth sunk into his shoulder and remembering all this he grits his teeth and his orgasm is upon him like drowning like being struck by stones.

Above him, John groans. “Oh fuck, oh yeah, yeah, that’s it, so hot—” and falls onto Sherlock, kissing his shoulders, his neck, then subsides with his fingers entwined with Sherlock’s and one leg thrown over him. “God,” he says finally, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much come on one person’s belly in my life before,” and giggles. “Don’t go anywhere, yeah? I’m going to wipe us off, we’re going to reek more than enough in the morning anyway.”

Sherlock makes his eyes open. “It’s good to see you planning ahead, John.” His voice must sound like his own, because John flashes a smile over his shoulder as he goes out the bedroom door. Sherlock thinks, I’ve never seen his buttocks before, and feels something wet and hot in his throat that makes him bite savagely at the ball of his thumb. By the time John comes back he has driven the sensation into retreat. He hides his hand under his head: he is a man lying in his bed, insouciant, after sex. The flannel is warm and Sherlock hums to convey to John that it is pleasant; its very pleasantness makes him want to leap up and pound his head into the wall. He could ricochet, he thinks, from wall to floor to wall to wall to floor until he was unconscious. John tosses the flannel onto the floor and kisses Sherlock’s cheek; what is expected now? Just a few more minutes, just a few more minutes, he’s exhausted, he’ll be sleeping in a moment, and then— Sherlock has no idea what comes then. John tucks himself against Sherlock’s side. “That was lovely, you know. I’m” — with sleepy energy he comes up on one elbow and looks straight into Sherlock’s face, his expression serious — “I’m very glad. I hope … I hope … Oh, God, I’m completely useless.” He kisses Sherlock’s mouth, lightly, strokes his cheek. Sherlock turns toward John’s mouth, kissing him back, the terrible hot feeling rises in his throat again and he doesn’t think he’ll be able to hold it back for another moment but finally, finally, John is overtaken by weariness and Sherlock lies there with his hand crushed between his teeth until John is deeply asleep.

It is very simple. John made love to Sherlock, and all Sherlock could think of was Jim, Jim, Jim. He draws himself out of the bed as careful as — as a surgeon cutting out a tumor, he thinks. As careful as John tucking him in. He showers for a long time, until he has composed himself, and then he dresses, and arranges John’s things, and sits at his high table with his microscope in front of him.
while the long night passes.
Chapter Summary

I am this great, unstable mass of blood and foam
and no emotion that's worth having could call my heart its home
my heart's an autoclave

- The Mountain Goats, “Autoclave”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John comes awake muzzily; he doesn’t know when he last slept so hard or so long. … Sherlock.
Yes, that would explain how relaxed and sated he feels. Happiness sweeps through him -- but no matter how happy somebody is, his bladder, if full, will require emptying. John can almost hear this in Sherlock’s voice, pointing it out just as he would elucidate what some murderer must necessarily have done. Romance! He drags himself out of Sherlock’s bed and toward the loo.

Having relieved himself, he becomes aware that his cleanup last night wasn’t the most thorough, that he’s sticky and reeking; furthermore, he hopes to get off again immediately after breakfast, or perhaps before. It’s only polite to show up clean, and when you’ve had sex with someone and spent the night, permission to use his shower is surely implied.

Under the hot water, more of John’s brain comes online and it occurs to him that Sherlock’s making himself rather scarce. A flicker of worry follows: Was he too toppy, too demanding? Sherlock had seemed enthusiastic at every point, beginning with that triply affirmative nod on the couch after he caught John tucking him in. He’d cracked one of his usual insulting jokes afterward too. Yes, he’s fine. John scrubs himself down as fast as he can — eager, now, to find out what morning-after snarky Sherlock might be like. He smiles into the water.

* 

Thoroughly washed, teeth brushed, heart alight, and a towel around his hips, John goes barefoot into the sitting room. Where he stops dead. Sherlock is fully dressed, trousers shirt jacket socks shoes, bent over his microscope. Every line of his body goes rigid at John’s step. This is bad, this is wrong; and, wronger and worse yet, John’s clothes, which last night had come off in a heap in the bedroom, are folded and piled on the armchair in put-them-on order: pants and socks on top, vest under them, shirt and trousers and jumper at the bottom. John’s shoes are lined up in front of the chair, correct as salad forks.

The message could not be more clear or less believable. “Sherlock?”

“There are your things. You can go.” Still not looking up from the microscope.

“Sherlock, what —”

“Thank you; that’s all.”

Wild thoughts of alternative realities. This is not the 221 B Baker Street John went to sleep in last
night, this is not the Sherlock who buried his face in John’s shoulder and kissed his bullet wound. John approaches the pale familiar stranger at the microscope, reaches out to touch his hand, and the stranger snarls at him:

"Have I not made myself clear? Get out."

—but John is already backing away, hands up, I surrender. Possibly not even Anderson has ever heard that tone; it’s a whipcrack to the face. John badly wants to sit down, because he thinks he actually might faint, so he sits, at the end of the couch where last night he had covered Sherlock with the blanket of spun feathers and raised his hand to caress Sherlock’s cheek. Even more than he wants to sit, he wants to dress. It is dreadful to be naked in the presence of someone who apparently hates you.

The process of putting on his clothes seems infinitely long, yet when he’s dressed and has folded the towel neatly no time has passed at all and he’s standing with his jacket in his hand looking at Sherlock’s back and Sherlock has not once glanced at him nor has he made another sound. John has not dared to speak to him again. Sherlock reaches for a microscope slide, fumbles it: the only hint of a contradiction to that vicious cold voice, that indifferent line of back. Except. Except John could swear the look on Sherlock’s face when he whirled against John was not rage but misery. John clears his throat.

“Yeah, I — Sherlock, I won’t— I won’t press you, yeah?” Oh, it’s hard, hard work keeping his voice steady. You’re a soldier, Watson, he thinks at himself, sternly and irrellevantly. This wasn’t covered anywhere in training, was it? Q. You meet a mad genius and fall in love. He is your heart’s desire. You take him to bed. Then he puts you out on your ear the morning after. Describe a sound tactical response. A. Move. Get through the fire zone as fast as you can. John does, he talks as fast as he can, in case Sherlock takes it into his head to physically shove him out the door before he’s done. “But if ... We’ve been friends, and something’s obviously gone wrong here and I hope you’ll talk to me later because I want to fix it if there’s any way at all that I can.”

Sherlock doesn’t move a muscle.

John can’t help himself: “I’ll text you, yeah?” And then he flees.

Behind him, Sherlock sets down the fumbled slide and presses both hands to his mouth.

*

JW to SH, 11:54 Monday

Please talk to me. I want to make it right.

[received; deleted unopened]

JW to SH, 14:00

I meant it about being friends. Please talk to me, Sherlock.

[received; deleted unopened]

JW to SH, 19:58

God, you’re a wanker.

[received; deleted unopened]
JW to SH, 20:03

Sorry. I know something’s wrong. You are a wanker, but not

[“Send” pressed accidentally instead of Back button]

[received; deleted unopened]

JW to SH, 01:08 Tuesday

You’re just deleting these, aren’t you. Will you read a letter? Please.

[received; deleted unopened]

JW to SH, 01:12

Writing a letter. I hope you’ll read it. Then I won’t ask again.

[received; deleted unopened]

*

The letter takes John most of a day to write, between patients whom he has to use every bit of willpower to pay attention to, and the result feels inept even to him. Sherlock bridles when people state the obvious; nothing John has written could possibly be anything but obvious to him.

Dear Sherlock,

I’ve been over and over Sunday night in my mind. It doesn’t take a consulting detective to see I must have stepped on something terrible. Believe me, please: whatever it was, I didn’t know it was there. Nothing matters more to me than your friendship. I would take that night back in a heartbeat for its sake.

It has meant so much to me to be your friend. No, that’s not true. It has meant everything. When we met I was like a stick figure. People saw me as human but I wasn’t really alive, I was only a representation of something alive. The last six months have been electric and even if you never speak to me again I’ll remember that feeling. I owe you so much, and I would do anything to fix this. Even if it only means we part as — friends? I want to say friends, but if we were friends we wouldn’t part, would we? So, even if we part only as “not enemies.” That would be something.

Your friend, always,

John Watson

*

In the week after the letter arrives, Sherlock does not open it.

But neither does he burn it, or shred it, or bin it. He props it behind the skull on the mantelpiece. He pictures a cage around it, to enable him to inspect it closely while remaining safe, the way zookeepers engage in protected contact with large predators.

John’s letter is small but presumably dangerous, like its author. The idea of John as a small, well-
equipped predator distracts Sherlock briefly from awareness of the present situation and makes him smile, but the smile feels warm, and the warmth feels like John, and the feeling of John is the feeling of being undone under John’s hands, under John’s mouth, with John speaking tenderly to him, while in Sherlock’s mind there was only Jim. The lick of self-contempt burns his face. He would like to draw his own intestines out on a spool. He is Jim’s creature. He will always be Jim’s creature. Better that John should believe him inhuman than that John know what Jim made of him, was able to make of him because Sherlock provided all the raw materials, arrived at Jim with them ready to hand and delivered them.

Study the envelope. John’s usual exact, careful hand for his own address; Sherlock’s, though, written out with particular decisiveness. John must have been steeling himself. The letter is his all-or-nothing sally, then.

One week after the letter arrives, Sherlock reads it.

* *

Time passes. Greg calls: “Not seeing you at the crime scenes, mate, and Sherlock’s being a right berk. More of one than usual, I mean. Any notion of what’s up with him?”

Molly calls: “Do — do you have any idea what might be going on with Sherlock? Only, in the mortuary the other day. He — well, he threw a microscope. And he never does that, he’s always so careful with the equipment. Not like ... Well, he’s always careful with the equipment.”

Mrs. Hudson calls: “Dear, have you and Sherlock had a falling-out? You know that violin, lovely when he’s in a good mood, cats in heat when he’s not. I wish you’d make it up with him.”

To Lestrade, John says, “Dunno, Greg. Reckon he got tired of having me for a dogsbody.” The D.I. balks: “Don’t give me that, John, he’s as miserable as a cat with a hairball it can’t bring up. About as pleasant, too.”

John laughs, and thinks he sounds a bit like a cat with a hairball, himself. He leans his forehead against the wall of his kitchenette, where he was making spag bol (Tesco, on special at 99p and tastes every penny of it, too). “Greg, if I knew what happened I’d tell you. Well, no, I wouldn’t tell you, but I’d try to fix it with him. I did try. Nothing doing.”

Lestrade is silent for a solid count of three. “Jesus. All right, I’m standing you a pint. You sound like you could use it. Copper Penny, Friday?”

John is so touched by this he can hardly get a word out. And he has a good evening with Greg, he really does. Greg talks about cases Sherlock had nothing to do with, and John tells a couple of his less grim stories from Afghanistan. Greg wins the pub quiz because he knows the names of all the Kardashian sisters in order of their age. “What?” he says to John’s consternated look. “My sister’s influence. She loves that shite, I can’t help it rubbing off.” This makes John laugh himself sick, which is great because it means he gets to spend three solid minutes without Sherlock’s name running through his head.

“Will I give him your best, then?” Greg says as they part.

“I think you’d be taking your life into your hands,” John replies.

Greg never does tell him how Sherlock reacts, but though he and John go for a pint every couple of weeks, he never again suggests giving Sherlock John’s best, so that’s an answer in itself, John supposes.
“I’m sorry, Molly. I don’t think he’s speaking to me. … No, best not tell him I said hello. Really, don’t.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Hudson. Sherlock’s made it pretty clear I’m not …” It’s hard to present Mrs. Hudson with a blank wall; she’s been more than Sherlock’s landlady for a long time, and she’s no fool, either. John’s voice falters. I’m not what? Not Sherlock’s cup of tea, not welcome, not a conductor of light, not his lover; not, anymore, his friend.

Time passes. Sherlock tries to play the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin, and finds himself hunched on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees, making a sound that is like barking or like choking. He prepares violin arrangements of a few of Satie’s solo piano works; these are clean and sharp and remind him of nothing. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hudson begs him to stop playing them. What he really wants is to smash the violin, but he also has an absurd and secret feeling that the violin has absorbed into itself the evening when he first played for John, and that destroying it would be like killing John, so instead he brings it downstairs and asks her to store it for him. He doesn’t explain why. She says only, “Oh, Sherlock,” and doesn’t ask. He forces himself to turn away and go back upstairs, where he has been comparing tissue samples from North American bees dead of colony collapse disorder with tissue samples from healthy European bees. He doesn’t have a case right now, so this will have to do.

One night, pacing, pacing, pacing, he turns on the television and Top Gear is on. He turns it off and goes out. He walks until his legs shake in the braces.

A day, and then another day; a week, and then another week, and another. Sherlock never appears at the physiotherapy clinic anymore. John tries not to think about this; what could he do, text and express the hope that Sherlock has simply moved to another appointment time? One night he makes himself go out to a leather bar, where he meets a skinny dark-haired man who likes having his hair twisted while John fucks his mouth. John reciprocates with the best hand job he can muster, shakes his head apologetically when the man asks for his number. Goes home feeling sick and lonely. He takes Bill up on the offer of dinner, turns him down for play: “Can’t, Bill, I’d be somewhere else the whole time.” Bill nods and orders them a bottle of wine.

John takes regular clinic shifts, eats regularly, sleeps regularly, feels tired all the time, a feeling he recognizes as the weariness of grief. People don’t know, till they’ve been through it, how exhausting grief is, or how grief is an amnestic: John tries in vain to remember the films he makes himself sit through. “I’m bored,” he finds himself whingeing — aloud! — one afternoon, making fun of Sherlock because he forgot for one split second that he wouldn’t be seeing Sherlock that day or the next or the one after, to laugh at his drama-queen wailings in person. Remembering makes him double over. There is not only the pain of the loss but the stomach-churning humiliation of those moments getting dressed, with Sherlock’s disdain (is that what it was?) filling the air. John puts on his coat and walks till he can’t think anymore and drops dead asleep when he gets home.

People go on through grief, one way or another. John has some regular patients he quite likes, and he experiences real pleasure when he sees one of them getting better. He can feel his shoulders relax into well-being when he takes a long walk on Hampstead Heath of a sunny day. Occasionally his morning tea even tastes good. Still, the longing lies in wait for him. Ambushes him daily, twice daily.
When he’s brushing his teeth, when he hears a report of a strange-sounding crime on the telly.

Three months, more or less, have passed, and John is writing up the note on his last patient of the day when Marjory the clinic receptionist knocks on his door to tell him he’s got a visitor, someone asking for him personally, by name. John finds her on her feet in the waiting room: a woman in late middle age, with straight black hair tied impatiently behind her head, and a complexion that says India or Pakistan. She has been watching for him, her face still and serious. “Dr. Watson,” she says immediately. “I would be grateful for a few moments of your time. I’m” — but John knows what she will say before she says it — “Sarita Banerjee.”

Sherlock. John shakes her extended hand. “Dr. Banerjee. I’ve heard your name.” His voice is not steady. Well, fuck it. “This must be about Sherlock. Has he been—” To his embarrassment, John can’t bring out another word. To ask any of the questions in his mind (Has he been arrested, has he been hurt, has he been ki—) would bring the possibility into being. Where it is anyway:

“He’s in hospital, I’m afraid. Please, may we speak privately? I won’t take long, but I would be glad if you heard me out.”

“Sherlock —” wouldn’t want you to talk to me, John doesn’t say. He swallows. “Yes, of course.”

He sits Dr. Banerjee in his office, fetches them both tea, mocks himself for temporizing.

“Why is Sherlock in hospital?” he manages.

“He’s been badly beaten up. Oh, he wasn’t even on a case, he was mugged. Late night, walking around and around London, thinking. And I’m sure you’ve noticed how he observes everything except when he observes nothing at all, for example a man with brass knuckles on who’s demanding his wallet and his mobile.” Dr. Banerjee rolls her eyes but there’s no amusement on her face. “He—Well, he can’t run or fight as he used to; his legs went out from under him. End story. … He’s conscious, so I have this all direct.”

“Was he concussed?” Even the most trivial brain injury isn’t trivial, can lead to long-term cognitive problems. The thought of Sherlock’s intelligence compromised is nauseating.

“I’m told he wasn’t. But the mugger broke a rib, and it punctured the left lung. So that’s partly collapsed.

“Listen.” Dr. Banerjee takes a deep breath. “I flew in overnight, I looked in on him at the hospital, and then I dropped off my suitcase at his flat. And here’s the thing. Your letter—” At the look on John’s face, she holds up her hand. “I haven’t read it.”

John shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“No, that was an entirely natural assumption. I’m presenting this badly, I do realize. I mean that I know the letter exists, because it is in a clear document case on Sherlock’s bedside table.”

John lets the implication register. Compresses his lips. Folds his hands together in his lap, finger by finger. He can hardly breathe. Sarita Banerjee leans forward.

“You know, Sherlock told me about you. He had made a friend, he said. He was” — her voice breaks — “very happy about it. He’d email and tell me about his cases, the ones he worked on with you, and it was all John, John, John: How John admired him, how John scolded him, how John was so tedious, always insisting that he eat and sleep and cut back on the nicotine patches — ” She is speaking swiftly now, urgently. “He was happy when he wrote about you … Oh, he was such a lovely little boy, you can’t imagine. And then his mother died, his father couldn’t cope and started to
drink, school was terrible for him.” Her jaw muscles flex. “I know he’s spoken to you about the, the cocaine, and the arrests. That horrible policeman, Anderson.” Her voice is steady again.

John nods. (“I stayed with my old caretaker. She’s a professor of chemistry now …”)

“All right. I promised I wouldn’t take up much of your time. Only, I hadn’t seen him happy in so long. Then a couple of months ago I realized there was no more John, John, John, so I asked about you, and Sherlock’s reply word for word was this: ‘I’ve made a wreck. Don’t ask again.’ I imagine you know Sherlock more than well enough to recognize that kind of shutting down and warning off.”

John nods again, numbly, picturing again Sherlock’s silence, his stiff back; hearing his lacerating “Have I not made myself clear?”

“I love him so dearly. We have always, from our earliest acquaintance, had an affinity, and being his senior by twenty years I find myself still looking out for him. One is meant to let people work out their own … well, relationship problems. Nevertheless, I am hoping I can persuade you to come see him now.”

John has no idea what it’s safe to feel. Anxiety for Sherlock may or may not be safe but it isn’t negotiable anyway. The other feeling he almost has is hope. Sherlock has kept his letter. The person who has been Sherlock’s friend since childhood, the one person of whom John has heard him speak with something like awe, hopes for salvage now. But: “He made it pretty clear he wanted me out of his life, Dr. Banerjee, whatever he’s done with my letter since. Anyway” — because he does have some pride — “what makes you so sure I want to see him?”

“Did you not hear me describe in detail your significance to him? As to your question about yourself, that’s easy. You haven’t thrown me out.”

Jesus, she sounds like the man himself — or, more likely, he learned to sound like that from her. John looks at the floor between his feet, trying not to envy this woman her long history with Sherlock, the clear and unshakable intimacy between them. He misses Sherlock sharply, achingly; pictures him in the hospital bed. Looking all right. Sherlock must, above all, be all right.

Sarita Banerjee is an advocate making a case, and she draws the jury back:

“Dr. Watson. I must guess at the outlines of what happened between you and Sherlock, but I’m sure he treated you abominably. Tell me, has he told you his diagnosis?”

John snorts and does his best public-school-boy imitation: ‘‘I’m not a psychopath, I’m a high-functioning sociopath.’ Where on earth did he find a doctor stupid enough— Oh. Oh, God, stupid doctor nothing, he diagnosed himself, of course he did.” An image of Sherlock beneath him, the wild soft look of his face, floods over John. “Sherlock’s not a sociopath,” he finishes, under his breath. Sarita Banerjee was Sherlock’s nanny, she sounds like Sherlock, she holds a chair in biochemistry at Columbia University, and she’s already read John’s mind at least once in this conversation. He blushes, which she kindly ignores.

“Of course he’s not. But he does believe himself to be damaged. Even, I daresay, corrupt. You are precious to him. Whatever happened, it left him not wanting himself anywhere near you.”

An interval passes during which John cannot speak at all. During it he stands, closes down the clinic laptop on his desk, and picks up his jacket and rucksack. At last, collected, he turns again to Dr. Banerjee. “What hospital?”
Sarita Banerjee’s smile is blinding. And she has, apparently, Sherlock’s own knack for getting a cab.

* 

The trip takes under twenty minutes, every last one of which John spends trying to work out what he’s going to say to Sherlock. He hasn’t come up with anything satisfactory by the time he steps into Sherlock’s doorway, but that doesn’t matter because it would have been driven out of his head anyway by what he sees.

Sherlock is neither texting, nor is he glaring out at the world in all its offensive stupidity, as would be natural and right. He is sitting up (good) and he has a chest drain (good); as John watches he produces a deliberate cough (good: coughing helps reinflate a partially collapsed lung). What isn’t good is that as he coughs he cries out: softly, under his breath. And then he bites his lip and cuts off the cry. And his eyes are squeezed tight. And sweat has collected along his hairline.

So this is the first thing John says to Sherlock:

“Fuck’s sake, Sherlock, what are they giving you for pain?”

Sherlock’s eyes snap open, and the first thing he says to John is:

“Paracetamol.”

They look at each other for a long moment. John has to swallow hard before he can speak again. “Right. Okay. So. I don’t know whether you want me here or not” — the glance Sherlock throws Sarita’s way isn’t lost on him — “but for the time being, as far as anyone’s concerned, I’m your regular doctor. And. I’ll see if I can get this sorted.” John turns on his heel and marches out of the room, breathing hard.

Sarita Banerjee whips after him and grabs his arm. “Explain.”

“The broken rib and the chest drain between them hurt like hell. He naturally wants to breathe shallowly, because that hurts less. But to reinflate the collapsed part of his lung, he’s meant to breathe deeply, and cough, and walk about. So he’s in there forcing himself to cough even though it makes him cry out because it hurts so fucking much. Whoever’s prescribing for him is undertreating his pain. Which is to say he’s setting Sherlock up not to reinflate his lung and also to develop pneumonia.”

“Jesus fuck,” Sarita says. “And all I thought when I saw him earlier was it’s only natural he should be a bit pale.”

“Well, you’re not a medical doctor, are you. But the utter idiot who’s prescribing for him— ”

By now they have reached the nursing station. John seeks out the first person who isn’t visibly at her wits’ end or on the phone, and puts on his mildest doctor-self. “Excuse me. I’m the regular GP for one of your patients here, Mr. Holmes in 328. I’d like to find out what orders have been left for the management of his pain.”

The nurse looks at Sarita.

“I’m officially Sherlock’s next of kin,” Sarita tells John. To the nurse: “Yes, please.”

The orders are for paracetamol, two 500-milligram tablets every eight hours. Nothing else. The nurse reports this with, to her credit, visible chagrin.
“Right,” John says. “And now would you please page the consultant in charge of Mr. Holmes for me?”

Roger Samuels calls back promptly, John has to give him that much. That much, and no more, because the shrift he gives John is so short it would be barred from a fairground ride. No, no, no, and again no; Mr. Holmes has his own former addiction to thank for his present discomfort, opiates aren’t to be casually handed out to drug abusers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

John clutches at his temper. “He cries out in pain when he coughs, Dr. Samuels. He’s not going to be able to reinflate his lung at this rate.”

“I’m sure he does make a melodrama, Dr. — Watson, was it? Addicts do. If there’s nothing more … ?”

John sets down the phone, in disbelief. Fifty feet down the hall, Sherlock will be coughing and crying out, coughing and crying out. “Can we,” John says to the nurse, “get a different doctor to take care of Mr. Holmes?”

“Or transfer him to another — ” Sarita cuts herself off. “Mycroft!”

John turns, and lo, there he stands: Umbrella Man. Sherlock’s mysterious, on the evidence perhaps even omniscient brother. Now he has a name.

Sarita says, “How did you find out?”

Umbr— Mycroft looks down at where he clasps the knob of his umbrella. “My position affords me considerable access.”

“For example, to clinics, after hours,” John can’t resist adding.

Sarita gives him a sharp, startled look. “You’ve met.”

John doesn’t take his gaze off Mycroft. “Yeah, if that’s what you call it when someone sends a pair of official-violence types into your office and then asks nosey questions about your friend.”

“I do apolo— ”

“Questions that could go direct to the friend himself, except he’s not talking to you. Since you’ve got ‘considerable access,’ though, Mycroft, maybe you could see about getting your estranged brother proper medical treatment. Go a bit of the way toward healing the rift, what do you say?” John realizes four things: one, he is shouting and out of breath; two, Mycroft is not the proper object of his fury; three, he possibly should climb down, given that it would be to Sherlock’s benefit to have Mycroft well disposed toward John and Sarita’s aims here; four, both Sarita and Mycroft are staring at him openmouthed. “I— Sorry,” he says. “Sorry. Just, he isn’t being treated well at all. Medically, I mean. If you’ve got any influence you can use …”

“Yes,” Mycroft replies. “I am aware of the difficulty.” There is a moment’s hesitation. “I could arrange to have a physician and a respiratory therapist visit at his flat, but” — and here he glances down, for an instant just like the brother he doesn’t otherwise resemble — “Sherlock would know who was responsible, and would refuse the care,” Sarita’s face, John notices, is set still. “However, it’s a simple matter to have a more … sympathetic consultant take over his treatment here. Sherlock would believe that to be the result of your agitation, Dr. Banerjee, Dr. Watson, which would be for the best.” Mycroft removes one hand from his umbrella, reaches into his jacket, withdraws a card case, and takes out two cards, one for Sarita, one for John. “I would greatly appreciate your letting me know how Sherlock fares, if you have a moment. Good day.”
“Mycroft!” Sarita’s voice is sharp.

He turns and looks at her.

“Mycroft,” she repeats, more gently, but he shakes his head. And down the hall he goes.

The card bears only the name Mycroft Holmes, a telephone number, and an email address. Engraved, not printed; a dim memory arises of arguments over cost before Harry and Clara’s civil partnership ceremony. “I don’t think I can lie to Sherlock,” John finally tells Sarita. “I’m crap at lying, anyway, but … I just don’t think it would be a good idea.”

Sarita is watching the empty hall; John follows her gaze, but Mycroft Holmes has vanished. Perhaps, John reflects, he has access to a magical elevator. Sarita puts a hand over her mouth. A muffled “Dammit,” and she seems to shake herself. To John: “Oh, you’re quite right, lying to Sherlock is not only impossible but fatal. However, as his nanny I made it my policy on occasion to present him with a fait accompli, when I was confident that the result would be to his benefit. We might just stay out of his room until Mycroft has acted.”

John says, doubtfully: “I don’t … Should we leave Sherlock for that long?”

Sarita raises an eyebrow at him. “You’ve met some of Mycroft’s staff, I gather. How long do you think it’ll take him to fix this? There’s a Pret up the street, and I’m jet-lagged. I need a takeaway coffee. That’s how long.”

They get back less than half an hour later to find one of the floor nurses just leaving Sherlock’s room. She gives them a thumbs-up and, indeed, there’s Sherlock with a PCA pump installed. He’s leaning back in the bed, eyes closed, drawing slow, relieved breaths, but turns instantly toward the door as they come in. “Dr. Banerjee.” But he’s looking at John — or rather, in John’s direction. Watching John in his peripheral vision, like a wary animal. Sarita touches Sherlock’s cheek and he leans into the touch minutely, blinking.

I probably wasn’t meant to spot that.

“As you know,” Sarita is telling Sherlock, “I flew in overnight. As you have surmised, this is a pain au raisin from Pret.” She shoves the bag at him. “And, as I am a mere sack of protoplasm, I need some sleep. Now that they’ve got your pain medications straight and John is looking out for you, I’m blowing this popsicle stand.”

At “popsicle stand,” Sherlock does, actually, visibly, forget himself for a moment, throwing Sarita an appalled look. Then: “What did you tell him?” — as if John weren’t there; John takes this as his cue and starts heading for the door.

“Stop right there,” Sarita says. John stops. To both of them: “I’ve played fairy godmother today as much as I’m inclined. You’re both here, you’re both adults — yes, Sherlock, even you — and it’s well past time you got over whatever stupidity this is. I’m for Baker Street and some rest. I shall expect to hear from you tomorrow, John. Good night, Sherlock, I’ll see you in the morning.” She kisses Sherlock’s cheek, squeezes his hand, points at the Pret bag, and is out the door.

John clears his throat, licks his lips. He can’t quite look at Sherlock, but then Sherlock apparently can’t look at him, either. “Could I— Would you mind if I sat down?” he ventures.

Sherlock waves a hand.

“She’s really something, your Dr. Banerjee.”
Sherlock glares at John, the “Obviously! Be precise!” glare. “She’s hardly ‘mine.’” There’s a silence that, actually, compares favorably with what John imagines to be the sensation of being racked. Sherlock straightens the top of the Pret bag, folds over the corners, and then tears a section off the bag and twists it into a tight worm. Watching him makes John want to grind his teeth. At last, Sherlock says: “Thank you. For, um. Your help.”

Well, that’s it, then. John scrubs at his face. This is going to be the last time he sees Sherlock: the real last time. “It wasn’t me, Sherlock. Your doctor wouldn’t give me the time of day. Mycroft” — the name, John expects, will go off like Semtex, but what does it matter? — “was here. He fixed it.”

Sherlock has said nothing, only gazes at John wide-eyed.

“So. I’m sorry. I tried to help, but I couldn’t.”

Sherlock chews at his lower lip.

Another silence. John is trying to force himself to stand up, rehearsing amicable but noncommittal goodbyes in his head, when Sherlock releases his lip in favor of tugging at his hair. “I can’t work it out!” He’s nearly spitting with frustration. “Why did you tell me about Mycroft, when, in my present physical condition and under the influence of the analgesics I am now being given, this is perhaps the one opportunity you will ever have to deceive me?” He pauses, he takes a deep breath, he hurtles forward: “For that matter, why are you here? Yes, yes, Dr. Banerjee brought you, but why are you still here?”

John levers himself up to bolt for the door, home to his bedsit, he’ll make himself go out later and fuck the first person who wants him to —

“But where are you going?” Sherlock cries. “No, no, that’s idiotic, you’re going home, of course, but why go if you’ve come in the first place?”

What? Leave, stay, it’s like watching the tennis, except for how it hurts.

“It’s maddening,” Sherlock continues. “I understand none of it, you can’t leave, you’ve got to explain.”

John sits. He folds his hands in his lap, then unfolds them. “You don’t want me to go?”

“How is that not evident?”

“For God’s sake, Sherlock, the last time I saw you, you were throwing me out of your flat. You wouldn’t even look at me. Excuse me if I’m less than sure of my welcome now.”

“I shall lay it out for you in small steps. One. You came because Dr. Banerjee fetched you; it is impossible to withstand Dr. Banerjee. Fine. Two — ” Sherlock has gotten ahead of his pain meds; he presses the button on his pump and takes one, two, three breaths before continuing, more slowly: “You saw that my treatment was inadequate, and your professional responses took over. All that makes perfect sense. But then why did you remain, once the treatment was improved and Dr. Banerjee had gone?”

“Are you serious?”

Sherlock hates rhetorical questions, so John takes satisfaction in the huff and the curled lip that this one produces. “Look, you’re starting from the wrong assumption. I didn’t come because Sarita Banerjee fetched me. I came because she told me you were here. There’s a crucial difference.”
Sherlock picks at the sheet.

“Sherlock. Why did you keep my letter?”

Sherlock picks harder at the sheet. A mutter: “It was pleasant.”

“ ‘It was pleasant.’ You tit.” A head of steam is building up. That’s pleasant. “It was ‘pleasant’ to think someone cared for — ” Oh. Oh. John silences himself. For the first time since he heard Sherlock cry out in pain, the pressure in the Boiler of John Watson’s Temper drops down, down, down. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You didn’t think I meant it, did you, and now here I am supplying you with solid evidence for the proposition that I did mean it, do mean it, and you don’t know what to do with that.”

Sherlock’s beautiful cheekbones are scarlet, his lips pressed together.

There is nothing in the world I wouldn’t do for you. Aloud, John says: “I am your friend.”

Defiantly: “You want more.”

“Well. There’s not much point in me lying to you about that. But I’m still your friend.”

“John.” In his normal speaking voice, and looking at John directly: “You know I can’t — can’t be what you want.”

For all his dramatics, Sherlock always uses words precisely. He doesn’t say “won’t.” He doesn’t say “don’t wish to.” He says “can’t.” John forges on:

“Mycroft said not to tell you he was the one who got your medication orders changed—”

“Actually,” Sherlock puts in, “he switched out doctors.”

How quickly the chance to correct someone restores Sherlock’s self-importance. John would smile if not for where his line of questioning is meant to go. “He said you wouldn’t accept the PCA if you knew it was his doing. Wouldn’t accept the help.”

An appropriate dose of pain medication for a broken rib and a chest drain would make anyone else a bit fuzzy, but despite his earlier disclaimer Sherlock looks rather laserlike just now. “And Dr. Banerjee suggested it might be best if I found out only after the deed was done. A preferred tactic of hers. She harbors a touching faith in my tractability.” Wordy: so, wary and evasive.

John thinks about the anomalies in a landscape that signify mines. Disturbed ground. A patch of scrub left to flourish when for hundreds of feet around every other growing thing has been taken up for fuel or food. One sibling intrusively interested in the other, who will have nothing to do with him. “Yeah, she said something like that. Sherlock, is it true? I mean, that you wouldn’t take help if you knew it came from Mycroft.”

“Don’t play detective, John, it’s not your strong suit.”

As a diversionary tactic, that was frankly feeble. John persists. “When you threw me out that morning, was it anything to do with Mycroft?”

John can remember astonishing Sherlock only once before: when he expressed dismay at having left Sherlock open to Anderson’s sniping about his history with cocaine. Neither occasion has brought him any joy; wearily, he wishes Sherlock were the kind of person you could throw a surprise birthday party for.
No, on second thought, he doesn’t.

“You’re thinking.” Sherlock says, slowly, “that Mycroft interfered with me. He did not.”

John believes him, but also he is assembling a file. In it are the following: “Can’t.” Mycroft’s drone-hovering coupled with Sherlock’s hostility. And now a second item of vocabulary: “interfered with” — less of a euphemism, perhaps, than it seems at first glance. The image arises in John’s mind of someone wielding instruments, a shadowed face, malignancy. He makes his voice as gentle as he can. “Will you tell me what did happen?” Between you and Mycroft, between you and me, between you and … who?

Sherlock’s expression has assumed its default remote and superior blankness. This is the look that so often comes with sneering, but Sherlock’s voice is soft. “Don’t, John.” And, almost inaudibly: “Please.”

Someone has set up a corps of drums in John’s ears, that’s how loud and fast his heart takes off. Every beat is What happened what happened what happened. On the evidence, the difficulty is not that Sherlock is asexual. Nor did Mycroft sexually abuse him. What’s wrong is worse than the aftermath of a bad boyfriend or even of straightforward violence. “He believes himself corrupt,” Sarita said. But Sherlock is not corrupt; Sherlock is strange and rude and arrogant, and he is good down to the bone. What happened? If not Mycroft … ?

“Will you warn me off,” John finally says, “if I come close to laying it open? Whatever it is?”

John used to take an amused pride in his ability to read Sherlock’s face, but in this moment it’s only a source of pain, to see how quickly a look of grief scuds past, is replaced by that almost inanimate alabaster mask. “You won’t,” Sherlock says, flatly. “You needn’t concern yourself.”

Through the window of Sherlock’s hospital room, a stretch of open air and then, across the river, the Houses of Parliament; if John went to the window, he could look down at the Thames, or crane his neck toward Westminster Bridge. He could turn in a circle with his eyes closed and, at the end, always find himself pointed Sherlock-north.

“Bollocks,” he says.

Sherlock stares.

“You’re thinking it’s— You’re thinking, John and I won’t shag again, so that’s it, all sorted, because you pretend the, the whatever-it-is lives in a sealed box that has the exact dimensions of your bed. But see, here’s what I’m thinking of, right now: the night you took me on that diamond-theft case. You burned your hand, you remember that? The burns hurt, and that was nothing to you, but me taking care of your hand, that you could barely stand still for. I can’t make myself believe it’s unrelated.”

Sherlock opens his mouth, winces, hits the button on the PCA pump.

“Once it kicks in you should try coughing a bit,” John says. “It’s been a good half hour of us just sitting here without you doing more than shouting at me, or breathing.”

“You want me to tell you when something you’re doing puts me … ill at ease,” Sherlock says.

“Well spotted.”

“And then what?”
“Then I stop doing whatever made you uncomfortable. Or, or if it’s something like treating an injury, then I go slow, or you take a breather, or I do the bare minimum necessary. I don’t know, Sherlock, I can’t predict. The point is, you don’t just throttle down, or panic, or — Well. Throw me out of your flat and refuse to talk to me. Cough.”

Sherlock coughs.

“You tell me, and then we figure out what to do. Both of us. Together. Now take a deep breath.”

Sherlock takes a deep breath.

“All right?"

John might have expected the response to be a long time in coming. Instead he gets just one raking glance, two chews of the lower lip, and a frown before Sherlock says, “Yes.”

“That easy?” He can hear the disbelief in his own voice.

Sherlock blinks and then looks, elaborately, all around the hospital room, taking in the PCA pump, the chest drain, John sitting with every muscle tense in the chair. One corner of his mouth twitches up. “‘Easy.’ I think, if you consult a dictionary, you’ll discover that your definition is an idiosyncratic one.”

This startles John into a laugh, and, for just long enough, into forgetting how impossible it felt to work out how to be with Sherlock again. “Well, I’m friends with you,” he says. “You berk,” which in turn makes Sherlock smile down into his bedcovers; so now they can go on to the next thing, which is for John to fetch some takeaway and then, having shoved a plastic fork and a pile of napkins at Sherlock, to ask about his cases and to order him, at intervals, to cough.

Sherlock offers to split the pain au raisin for afters, but then watches John’s share covetously until John snorts at him and gives it back.

Chapter End Notes

I imagine Sherlock as being, more or less, in the William Gull Ward of the North Wing of St. Thomas’ Hospital, but I haven’t specified because there’s no possible way of getting the details correct. My imaginary hospital occupies St. Thomas’ location; hence the view.
Chapter Summary

It's good to be reconciled. No, it's wonderful. But it isn't easy.

Chapter Notes

A man takes his sadness down to the river and throws it in the river but then he’s still left with the river. A man takes his sadness and throws it away but then he’s still left with his hands.

-Richard Siken, “Boot Theory”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
JW to SH 15:02
written the game developers you mean?

SH to JW 15:04
Of course. Surely they will wish to improve their product sales.

SB (using SH’s phone) to JW  16:07
He has thrown over the birds in favor of a 20-year-old murder. Am deleting the game from his pho

SH to JW 16:08
Dr. Banerjee is deleting nothing.

JW to SB 16:16
I’ll be there as soon as I can.

*  

John arrives at the hospital to find that Sherlock has not only solved the twenty-year-old murder but also almost fully reinflated his lung; if he’s finished the job by tomorrow morning, the new doctor plans to remove his chest tube and send him home. He is, nevertheless, in a snit, because said doctor has given him an informative lecture concerning the risk of spontaneous pneumothorax among tall thin men who are under the age of forty and smoke cigarettes. “Kim could not cite even one study to support her claim that spontaneous lung collapse is more likely among persons who have experienced a traumatic one.”

John looks at Sarita. She rolls her eyes. “That would be Dr. Kim Oliphant. Mr. Sherlock Holmes is attempting to belittle her because he doesn’t like her advice, of course. Sherlock, let me remind you that this is the same doctor who had the good sense to provide you with pain relief.”

“It may or may not be more likely after a trauma,” John puts in, “but you’re in the highest-risk group for spontaneous pneumothorax to begin with. Tell you what: you quit smoking, and I quit giving you a hard time about nicotine patches. No, let me amend that. The hard time starts with the third patch instead of the second.”

With hauteur, Sherlock attempts to fold his arms, but the chest drain gets in his way.

“Must I be subjected to these lectures?”

“Okay, okay then,” John says, because that was Sherlock sounding cornered, and Sarita has thrown him a look to be sure he heard it. Time to change the subject: “Thai?”

But what John would really like is to ask Sherlock who cornered him, and when, and to get a clear answer, and then to find those people and beat them about the face and head; and even all of that, he acknowledges to himself, is a substitute for what he wants even more truly, which is to offer Sherlock comfort and have him accept it. Specialty of the house, wanting what you can’t have. … At least you’re friends again, he reminds himself: twenty-four hours ago you thought even that much was gone for good.

*
A broken rib takes weeks to heal, and Sherlock’s only been out of hospital a couple of days, so he can’t origami himself onto the floor in the corner of the upstairs bedroom. He sits on the bed, leaning against the wall, to watch Sarita pack. She leaves from Heathrow in the morning — “If you’re lucky,” Sherlock said earlier, just to needle her with the triteness of any remark on Heathrow’s notoriously overcrowded scheduling. “Not worth even cutting my eyes at you for that one,” Sarita told him.

Now she zips up her suitcase and sits next to him, tucking his hair behind his ear. He slides down to lie on his back and hisses: too fast.

“Ow,” Sarita says. “You’ll be careful”: a prediction with the force of command.

“Yes, Dr. Banerjee.”

She presses her lips together, readies herself, but Sherlock cuts in:

“Don’t say it. Don’t ask it. Don’t think it.”

“Sherlock — ”

“Lovers confide in each other; doing so is an aspect of intimacy. So, at any rate, I’m given to understand. Therefore the answer is no, no, and again no. It’s impossible.”

“And yet I hear you engaging with the prospect at some length.”

He expels breath angrily, winces.

“I won’t persecute you about this, dear heart,” she goes on. “But I believe him to be equal to any difficulty if the prize to be won is you.”

“John Watson, a champion from Greek myth, then? A Hercules of the heart? Cleaning out the Augean Stables?”

Sarita is briefly derailed. “I’d’ve thought you’d deleted all that.”

Sherlock hitches the shoulder on the side opposite his bad rib. “It’s surprisingly useful.”

“As a means of prevarication, at any rate. Once for all, Sherlock, you are a job of work but you are no Augean Stables, and John Watson is well up to the task of coping with you.”

Sherlock closes his eyes. “Nevertheless,” he says, eventually, on an exhale. And then, sitting up with care and looking at Sarita directly: “He’s my friend. That’s what I can have in reality. What I want, what I might have if certain details of my personality and history were not as they are, is and always will be beside the point.”

Sarita speaks only after a long pause. “If I thought I deserved it, I would beg your forgiveness for not challenging you that summer when you came to visit. I was a coward and I failed you shamefully.”

“Don’t be stupid. The damage was done, and long done, by then.”

“No, it wasn’t. How much damage have you done yourself, since, on account of the uses Jim Moriarty made of you?”

Sherlock’s eyes widen.

Sarita tsks. “He has been the poison of your life since you were fourteen, Sherlock; of course I
remember his name.”

Sherlock glances toward the window, though it overlooks the back of 221 and not the street. “John will be here at any moment. It would be best — It would be best if we left this topic. For my equilibrium. Please.”

Sarita raises a hand in acquiescence.

“It was with your help I quit the cocaine. You should remember that.” He bends carefully toward her and touches her hair. “And to have John as my friend is much more than nothing. I owe you that, as well.”

“All right,” Sarita says, still reluctant; “all right.”

*

Supper, courtesy of John, comprises an immense quantity of fish and chips (“Last evening in England, John, traditional meal, was that the idea? There’s an American word for this mind-set, you know: cornpone”; “Ta, Sherlock, I’ve heard the term. As it happens, your friend there asked for fish and chips specially”; Sherlock gives Sarita a look expressive of the profoundest betrayal).

The takeaway forgot to include any malt vinegar, and Mrs. Hudson has none in her cupboards, but fortunately Sherlock has some left over from an experiment.

John is confounded. “An experiment on what?”

“Oh, I had a case three years ago. Serial killer. He preserved samples of his victims’ pancreases in malt vinegar. I was curious to what extent the process degraded the DNA.”

There is a silence while John, Sarita, and Mrs. Hudson all contemplate the bottle where it stands on the coffee table.

“One of the unfortunates thus pickled,” Sherlock says, as if it has just occurred to him, “was named Dill.” Sarita and John howl at him, Mrs. Hudson delivers her not-remotely-scandalized “Sherlock!,” and he smiles into his plate, separated from the pain of his rib by the good meds as if cushioned by flannel, imagining for a moment that he might need nothing but this.

*

A couple of weeks later, when the rib is doing well enough to enable Sherlock to visit crime scenes, Lestrade asks him to come by his office, not to look at a case file but to meet with a Senior Official of the Metropolitan Police Who Would Like to Discuss with Mr. Holmes the Possibility of Regularizing His Relationship with the Force.

John doesn’t at first understand why Sherlock is put off. “What? It makes sense. They benefit from your skills already, but it’s like a bad spy novel, with Greg calling you on his personal mobile and referring to you as an anonymous expert when he has to refer to you at all. Take a contract with them and they can credit you publicly and pay you, plus everybody in the Met who’s got a case they can’t work out for themselves can ask you in on it.”

Snort.

“Yeah, yeah, I know: idiots. But it means more interesting cases for you, because the field’s so much wider. Everything in London, not just what Lestrade’s assigned to. —Though, it occurs, he should get dibs.”
“It’s a leash, John; how is that inapparent even to you? Money is control. Official acknowledgment entails official regulation. People who have jobs report to their superiors.” Sherlock utters this last with pulverizing disdain.

“Was it an ultimatum, then? Go official, or get out?”

“No. The administrators would like me to think so, but I’m far too useful; Lestrade isn’t going to stop calling if I don’t cooperate.”

John objects. “You’re a bit more than useful to Greg, Sherlock. He is, actually, your friend.”

“I — ” Grudgingly: “All right. But that’s not the point.” Sherlock has been speaking vehemently, almost angrily, with large gesticulations; now he draws down into himself, like a fan shutting or a bird folding its wings, and his voice quiets. “They do have something I want, John: cases. Work. The only work that — ” Sherlock looks away, presses his mouth tight.

John experiences a sudden vivid memory of the evening when Sherlock first played the violin in his hearing — of Sherlock’s distracted glances toward the instrument, his unwillingness to admit that he urgently wanted to play. All his casual scorn, his demandingness — about food, about the quality of Anderson’s forensics, about the idiocy of everyone and everything — is a screen, John thinks, behind which Sherlock conceals his heart’s longings. For music. For the work that engages his beautiful mind. John thinks, too, as he still often does, of their conversation in the hospital, of that precise “can’t.” He says none of this. Instead:

“Well, then, we should try to get you cases from other sources. Make you less dependent on the Met.”

Sherlock stares at him.

“You take private clients, you’ve had a couple since we met. How do they find you?”

Sherlock hesitates. “People from university.” (*Why does he look so uncomfortable about that?*) “Or sometimes Lestrade refers them. Every so often, someone finds the website and emails a question that isn’t too unbearably stupid.”

“But there’s nothing on the site that says, in so many words, ‘Sherlock Homes takes private cases.’ What if there were? What if — All the notes I’ve made on the cases you’ve brought me on or told me about. I could write those up, examples of problems you’ve solved that nobody else could. Kind of a shop window for you, draw in the customers.”

“‘Dear Mr. Holmes’ — no, it would be ‘Dear Sherlock,’ and it would be misspelled: ‘Dear Sherlock, my wife comes back from her tennis lessons disheveled and reeking of a cologne I don’t wear, what should I do?’ John, the horror.”

“You could set up a whatsis, an auto-reply.” At the glee on Sherlock’s face: “A polite auto-reply, you tit. You know what, I’ll write it for you. Then you can look through the accumulated requests when you feel like it and answer any that might be worth your while.”

John watches Sherlock cast about for some reason why this idea is absurd. *John, I can’t imagine why you think I would waste my time with it,* but the truth is it requires very little of Sherlock’s time; the work involved will mostly be John’s.

“I don’t see any benefit to you,” Sherlock says at last, apparently having noticed this as well.

John shrugs. “Why do I come along on your cases when I can? It’s a bloody carnival, the most fun
I’ve ever had in my life. Besides, better cases for you means fewer strops aimed at me. It’s win-win.”

“What an appalling locution, John.”

“I knew you’d hate it. So?”

*

Rather to John’s surprise, the blog — he calls it The Casebook of Deduction — starts drawing visitors to Sherlock’s site almost immediately, and with them emails, some of which do indeed turn out to offer puzzles that Sherlock finds worthy of his attention.

There’s one that sticks in John’s mind for a long time, though he never does write it up for the blog. Too revealing, though he’s not sure of what:

An executive at Northrop Pharmaceutical brings home with him some sensitive research materials that exist in hard copy only; he locks the papers in his safe overnight, but in the morning finds they’ve gone walkabout. The culprit, it transpires, is his wife, blackmailed into the theft by an old boyfriend who freelances as an industrial spy and who suggests that if he doesn’t get those materials, he might find it convenient to show her husband some video of her and said boyfriend shagging back in the day.

What makes the case remarkable isn’t, for once, Sherlock deducing the solution — the wife brings it to them, under cover of offering them hot tea while they’re looking over her frozen back garden for signs of an intruder.

“I panicked.” Hilda Trelawney is trying to pass off her wet eyes as a byproduct of the raw weather, but her voice is shaking. “And now Jonathan’s saying he could lose his job over this, could be sued even. Edward’s not answering my texts and— Please, Mr. Holmes …”

Edward Lucas is the ex-boyfriend-cum-industrial-spy. When John and Sherlock arrive at his address it’s all too clear why he isn’t answering Ms. Trelawney’s texts: he’s been stabbed to death on the pavement outside his building. A tall, exhausted-looking woman in handcuffs is leaning against a police car, her head bowed. She is flanked by two constables. “Oh! Mrs. Lucas,” says Sherlock, eyeing her. “Self-widowed, as we see. Well, no wonder she did for him. Come on, John, Hilda Trelawney’s got nothing further to fear — not from this quarter, anyway.”

John looks from the handcuffed woman to Sherlock, and back again. “Wait, what are you talking about, ‘No wonder she did for him’?”

“And here I thought physicians nowadays were taught to spot signs of domestic trouble. For goodness’ sake, look at her face!”

“I don’t…” But no, John does see it: heavy makeup, and under it puffiness and the shadows of bruising. There’s Mrs. Lucas’s stance, too, shoulders drawn up as though trying to bring her arms forward to guard her belly.

Sherlock sees him register this. “Yes, I’d wager she’s taken a kick or two. Seen enough? Ready to get back to our shadow client with the news?” He pulls out his phone.

“Hang on, Sherlock, we ought to say something.”

“Not unless you want to spend the entire afternoon explaining how we just happened to stop by in time for the aftermath of a homicide.” Sherlock keeps walking, texting as he goes.
He hands John the phone: “There; happy?”

SH to GL, 12:44

Edward Lucas murder. Dimmock’s case. John wishes to apprise Met of mitigating circumstance that victim beat suspect habitually. SH

John casts his mind’s eye over the past minute. “You were composing that text before I said anything.”

Sherlock raises his arm so that a cab appears. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

* 

The thing about Sherlock’s kindness, though, is that, in its logic it’s often indistinguishable from cruelty — at least, to most observers. Hilda Trelawney takes a deep, relieved breath, rubs at the knees of her trousers. “It’s awful, but I can’t say I’m sorry Edward’s dead. I’m not surprised he turned out a batterer, either; his rages were terrifying. — Well. Now I’ve just got to work out how to get the papers back into Jonathan’s safe and persuade him to look for them there one more time.”

Sherlock frowns at her. “No, what you’ve got to do is decide which of us tells your husband what happened.”

“What — Why? I put the papers back, he finds them, and no harm done.”

The incomprehension John shares with Hilda Trelawney must be written on his face, because Sherlock takes one look at him and throws up his hands. “How does either of you dress yourself of a morning? Think. Edward Lucas didn’t work at Northrop Pharmaceutical. He had no fixed employer at all. How, then, did he know that a company executive was bringing home hard-copy research materials to study? … Yes, slowly the light dawns: Northrop has within its ranks a mole. Lucas is out of the picture, but the mole remains. How long do you think this person will wait before attempting to peddle his or her services again?”

Hilda Trelawney is so pale, John thinks she may faint where she sits. “That’s it, then. That’s my marriage done. I might as well pack my bags this minute.”

Sherlock shrugs, one-shouldered. “You’ve had, what, five, six years of wealth that you wouldn’t otherwise have enjoyed. The prenup” — well, even John would have guessed there was a prenup, so no points to Sherlock for that one — “will ensure you’re not left destitute. All in all, I don’t see what you have to complain of. He’d have divorced you within a few years anyway.”

Her shocked “What?” and John’s “Oi, Sherlock” meet in the air.

Sherlock looks honestly puzzled. “An old boyfriend has a video of the two of you engaged in sex. Your husband hadn’t even met you when it was made. Yet you’re so afraid of his reaction to this trivial episode that to avoid it you do, genuinely, betray him. How much time do you imagine this marriage has?”

“Oh, my God,” John says, with all his heart. He looks around for a box of tissues, spots one, hands it to Hilda Trelawney who is now sobbing outright, and practically drags Sherlock out of the house.

“That was a bit merciless, don’t you think?”

“But it was all true,” Sherlock protests. “There is a spy at her husband’s company, she did betray
him, and the marriage is doomed. I don’t understand what objection you can possibly have to my spelling it out. Why would it have been better to leave her to be blindsided?”

John opens his mouth and, finding that nothing emerges, closes it again. “Tell you what, let’s just work on your delivery,” he finally manages.

Sherlock is at Barts watching Molly Hooper autopsy a woman who died after eating a vegetable stir-fry in which *Amanita phalloides* unfortunately stood in for the straw mushrooms that *Amanita* somewhat resembles. There’s no question of foul play, just carelessness: “Straw mushrooms don’t even **grow** in the UK; why does no one ever do their research?” Sherlock inquires of the air. Molly has made some slides of the brain tissue and he urgently wants to examine the astrocytes, which are of a type characteristic of the hepatic encephalopathy caused by *A. phalloides* and otherwise found only in Wilson’s disease: he has never seen them for himself before. He would light a cigarette to occupy himself but even Molly’s tolerance falls short of allowing smoking in the autopsy room (and Sherlock grudgingly concedes the merits of her position). Why, why, why do people notify him of interesting cases and then delay in providing him with the opportunity to study them? It’s all Sherlock can do not to shoo Molly away from the microscope by the time she straightens and says cheerfully, “All yours, I’m off for a bit.”

Sherlock has been absorbed in contemplation of the encephalopathic brain for some time when he hears Sally Donovan’s voice behind him. “Where’s Molly gone?”

“To get coffee. To refresh her lipstick. To rob the Bank of England. How should I know?” *Go away.*

Donovan rolls her eyes. “Well, tell her I stopped by to ask her if she’s coming to the pub quiz Friday night — No, what am I thinking of, I’ll just text her.”

Sherlock turns back to the astrocytes. *You are dismissed, Sergeant Donovan.* But instead of leaving she says, “Holmes. That was quick of Watson, noticing Arabella Lucas’s injuries.”

Sherlock frowns into the eyepiece. “Who?”


“Oh. No, don’t be ridiculous, of course it wasn’t John who noticed she had been — ” Too late, Sherlock catches himself.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. So you spotted the signs and told him. And then he made you text the guv, that’s how it went?”

Sherlock is very still over the microscope. “Yes, that’s precisely correct, Sally. Are you quite finished with your chain of reasoning?”

“See,” Donovan says, “the thing is, why say anything to Watson at all? If you were going to leave it at that, I mean, and not make sure Dimmock’s crew knew to ask her about the abuse. Was it just because you’re a wanker and you like to show off?”

Sherlock doesn’t reply. Heat is creeping up his neck; he would like to turn and glare at Donovan, but if he does she’ll see the corresponding flush on his face. His earlier glance at her revealed that she is biting her fingernails again, always a tipoff that the affair with Anderson is going poorly, and Sherlock could probably drive her off by remarking on the fact, but John has been insistent that this
is “baiting” and “not good,” so instead he keeps looking into the microscope until with relief he hears the autopsy room door click open and Donovan says, “Oh, Molly, good, the DI and I were just wondering — ”

*

Sherlock can’t be John Watson’s lover. He has told John Watson so. He has told Sarita Banerjee so. He has, obviously, told himself so.

*

On many evenings, Sherlock is alone in the flat in Baker Street, with perhaps the sounds of Mrs. Hudson’s telly drifting up.

*

Though on some evenings when Sherlock is home, Mrs. Hudson’s telly is quiet, because she’s out to dinner with her gentleman friend, Paul. Paul is afraid of Sherlock. Sherlock does nothing to diminish his fear, in case Paul should ever behave badly toward Mrs. Hudson.

*

Sherlock cups his hands around certain items of knowledge.

Most important: his attempt to excise himself from John’s life came to nothing. This even though, in that attempt, Sherlock behaved as cruelly as he knew how. (Which is saying much, because Sherlock has considerable experience as the object of cruelty and may be judged an expert.)

John is not impervious to cruelty: he was stricken when Sherlock threw him out, and he expressed anger toward Sherlock during their conversation in the hospital. Yet he had come immediately to the hospital when informed that Sherlock had been injured and was a patient there; and when he arrived, his first acts were directed toward seeking relief of Sherlock’s pain.

These facts lead to the inescapable conclusion that John not only cares for Sherlock (besides, John said so, and John tells the truth) but also has forgiven him; John’s behavior since then has done nothing to contradict such a view.

What is perhaps even more confounding, John acknowledges frankly his desire for Sherlock yet, though he demonstrates affection, he does not press his suit. Sherlock is not certain that he, Sherlock, could refuse John, any more than he had the first time — the only time, he reminds himself.

Sherlock tries not to think of how it was to have John over him, touching him. Most precious and terrible is the vision of John, already more than half dropped into sleep, saying “I’m very glad,” and kissing the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, while Sherlock lay desperate for his own annihilation.

*

John is getting plates out of Sherlock’s cupboard. He reaches for a mug to carry forks and knives in and Sherlock says, “Best not —,” reaching across John, so that they touch along their sides for a moment, Sherlock’s arm brushing John as he stretches up and over to block him from the cup and whatever noxious substance may be in it; and through their clothes they can feel each other’s muscle and bone, but more than that, not the body alone but its purposefulness, its intentionality. Near each other like this is, always must be, toward each other; they shy hard apart with the imperative to not want, not want, not want.
John’s memory of Sherlock under his hands wears away, powdery as insect wings. “Memory palace,” he tells Sherlock one night when they’re talking over a case and Sherlock is impatient with him for forgetting some detail of the victim’s shoes; “I haven’t got a memory palace, Sherlock, it’s more like a memory hovel”; “I’m painfully aware,” Sherlock replies.

John jabs him in the ribs — “Oh, God, wait, was that the side … ?”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock says, fast, looking away. “You must be aware that it healed months ago.”

This might be true or a lie, depending on what antecedent the listener takes “it” to have. John watches the side of Sherlock’s face, where there is nothing to be seen — Sherlock has made sure of that. “Right,” says John, “right, so — the laces on his shoes, you were saying?”

Goodish sums of money begin appearing in John’s bank account. He conducts an interrogation of the prime suspect, one Sherlock Holmes, who admits to the offense. “It’s clients from the blog, John. Your work is bringing in business, which brings in fees; therefore, you should be paid a percentage.”

John tries to work out why this makes him angry, discovers that the money makes him feel like a kept man, points out to himself that (a) he is not a kept man, and (b) it is true the blog brings in clients and money, but (c) he feels like a kept man … Aha. “Look, yes, your reasoning’s perfect, as far as it goes, but you’re missing the most important point.”

Even in a discussion like this one, the face Sherlock Holmes makes when someone has offered the preposterous suggestion that he is missing something, anything at all, much less the most important point, brings John a really unholy measure of glee.

“I started the blog out of friendship, right?”

Sherlock cautiously accepts this.

“So … Friendship’s to be returned with friendship. And you do that already, Sherlock. You’re my best friend. You don’t owe me extra for the blog, okay? Just pick up the bleeding cab fare once in a while.”

For a man who balks at visits to A&E, it’s convenient to know the home address of a doctor who will deal with the long gash on his left triceps, which he got sliding along a sloped roof and can’t see to bandage for himself. John wakes one Sunday morning to find Sherlock, who has never visited John’s flat before, sitting at the kitchen table with a bloody towel pressed between his arm and his side. “What the hell,” John says, fetching his medical kit.

Sherlock explains the circumstances that led to the injury (“Sometimes it’s simply more efficient to eavesdrop in person than to place a bug”) and, later in the night, to three arrests in an unusually sophisticated con.

“… And then you picked my lock and let yourself in. How long were you sitting here?”

Shrug.

John frowns at him. “Next time wake me, all right? Save me a towel. Okay, I’m ready to get started.”
Sherlock looks momentarily startled, as though it hadn’t occurred to him that he had any part to play in what follows, and then he sets his face into the alabaster mask John hates, and strips off his shirt. The torn edges stick in the drying blood on his arm.

John’s bed would have done well in lieu of an exam table, but ... “Here, lean forward on the table and just let that arm out to the side. Okay, now I can see what I’m dealing with. This will probably sting, sorry.” John washes the arm and rinses the wound with tepid water, pats the edges dry with a clean towel. There’s no debris in the wound, so at least he can spare Sherlock having bits of roofing picked out of him with tweezers. The laceration needs stitches at one end, where it’s gone deeper than John would like, but otherwise should close nicely with tape. “Lidocaine coming now, two quick pinches.”

Sherlock is breathing with purposeful steadiness; it must bother him not to be able to see what’s going on. John takes the first stitch, the second, considers a third.

“Stop.”

John backs his chair away so fast the legs squeal against the floor.

Sherlock’s pupils are dilated and he has pressed his lower lip between his teeth. Silence beats between them; John counts one … two … three …

On “five,” Sherlock lets out a breath and says, “You stopped.”

“You did say ‘Stop.’”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

This is probably the dullest exchange anyone has ever had with Sherlock Holmes, except that it obviously has some significance John isn’t getting — Wait. “This was an experiment. You wanted to find out if I would stop.”

Short nod.

“But you were, in fact, uneasy.”

Nod.

John takes a moment to consider. “Okay, here’s what. I should, really, close up that cut a bit better. Another stitch at that same end, and tape for the rest. You tell me when you’re ready; the lidocaine’s good for another ten minutes at least. I can fix us some tea in the meantime.”

Sherlock studies him; John studies Sherlock back. John feels — How does he feel? Sherlock didn’t grimly endure; he asked for a breather when he needed one, and John gave it, instantly. Evidence, John hopes, for a case of sorts.

“Tea after,” Sherlock says. “You can finish now.” Perhaps a minute and a half has passed since he said “Stop.” He closes his eyes and, John thinks, almost falls asleep as John closes up the wound and, quiet as he can make himself, bins the wrappings and puts the used sharps into an empty jar to take to the clinic tomorrow. He thinks about why Sherlock was sliding along the roof rather than braced and stationary, and whether his weak legs might have had anything to do with that. But though Sherlock’s back at physio, though he wears his braces and, grudgingly, rests when he has to, he does what he must while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge any of it. Having his arm examined and patched has taxed him more than enough for one day; John lets the matter go.
Sherlock hasn’t been living in a cave since Jim; he is well aware that there is a rubric under which he might fit his sexual imaginings. Alone in his flat, Sherlock paces, thinking this over. An idea forms. He tries to push it back, but as soon as he knew the idea existed, it was too late to delete it.

_Could John …_

_I might …_

The thought refuses either to complete itself or to disappear.

_I might put myself in the way of his touch._

(“That’s exactly what you did with me,” Jim whispers in Sherlock’s ear. “See how that worked out?”)

John readily directs Sherlock: Eat this sandwich before you fall over, you’ve been working all night. _Will you keep your hands like that for me? Yes, like that._

There is a continuum of such things. Would John, perhaps, direct him? Would that be enough?

(“Too much is never enough for you, is it, sexy?”)

Sherlock often removes his braces when he is in the flat alone; so when he has been pacing for some time, his left leg trembles under him. The sensation recalls him to himself. Jim showed him that, touched in certain ways, he will say anything, do anything, be anything. If the weakness in his legs progresses sufficiently, he will be inadequate to the work on which John’s admiration was founded. As for the notion of John merely directing Sherlock, it is absurd; sooner or later, probably sooner, the depths of Sherlock’s abjection would become clear. How he cannot think of anything but Jim when ...

The braces, the work — these are an exoskeleton. The braces enable Sherlock to present himself as physically whole (under most circumstances, and for now), and to do the work. The work he draws as a shield around himself, concealing the will-less creeping thing that Jim proved him to be.

John does care for him; John has forgiven him. This, Sherlock permits himself to remember. He would like to shove into an oubliette certain other knowledge: what it was to feel John’s sexual generosity and confidence and care. Someone else will have that aspect of John eventually, will get to keep it; Sherlock reminds himself that when that person appears, he himself will be losing nothing. Except, and it has to be admitted that this is likely, a large portion of John’s time, as persons with (Sherlock works up a creditable interior sneer at this) _personal attachments _almost always _prioritize _them.

Would John have dinner with Sherlock? Of course he would. He would check his watch at odd moments, though, so as not to be late home.

Sherlock will have to steel himself for that. Also for the inevitability that John’s free evenings will grow fewer — that too must be anticipated. But as long as he doesn’t make the mistake of going to bed with John again, as long as he continues to present John with the Sherlock who is clever and forceful, the Sherlock whom John admires, then John will drift away with his esteem for Sherlock intact. “Hey, that’s my old mate,” he’ll say, with pleasure, when he sees the consulting detective’s name in the paper. “You’d never believe it, we met in physio. Used to have takeaway together a couple of times a week.”
Sherlock has made John an administrator of The Science of Deduction, so that he can post his blog without involving Sherlock and also delete comments from obvious trolls. Lately some twit who goes by maths-at-ucl has been posting often. “Say hi to Sherlock for me!” “Hi to that clever man!” “Now that he’s getting famous, do you suppose he still has time for those of us who knew him when?” John thinks of asking Sherlock about that last one, but then decides that if maths-at-ucl really is an old friend of Sherlock’s he can just send an email via the form on the site like a normal human being, and sign his name. Delete. Delete. Delete.

Sherlock’s predictions aren’t based on nothing, exactly: John does try to date. Anonymous sex with a Sherlock stand-in had done nothing to ameliorate his grief during the period John privately calls their hiatus, and Bill Murray is trying out monogamy with a new lover and so isn’t available for play these days. Good Samaritan that he is, though (“Terrible to see that good hard hand of yours going to waste, John”), Bill fixes him up with a friend of a friend, a history teacher at a secondary school in Camden who sounds promisingly tough-minded. “He’s not expecting me to “sir” him over coffee at Starbucks, I hope,”” Bill quotes.

“‘Mary’?” John replies, feelingly. “‘John and Mary’?”

“You haven’t seen her piercings.”

The date, such as it is, takes place at the Wellcome Collection. The annual photo award exhibit has just gone up, offering them a handy topic in case conversation lags — which it does precisely because the photos are fascinating: every image of a desmid, of connective tissue, of the surface of an epileptic brain, strikes John with the thought of how much he’d like to hear Sherlock discourse about how a clever murderer might make use of the science underlying it. Or how he once caught a kidnapper thanks to the observation that a chicken egg had been fertilized five days earlier and not two.

Mary Morstan is not deferential at all, and her eye is sharp. The third time she catches John glancing at the doors through which he imagines Sherlock might appear, she calls him on it:

“You’re looking for someone.”

John opens his mouth to say something plausible, but she’s shaking her head. “No, I mean someone in particular. Are — are you with someone already, and looking for a third? I wouldn’t necessarily rule it out, only Bill gave me the impression— Oh, dear,” she finishes, because, standing in front of a scanning electron photomicrograph from which an immensity of moth fly glares down at him, John has taken his head in his hands and groaned aloud.

He says the only thing possible: “I am really, really, really sorry.”

“You thought you were single, but you’re not.”

That’s it in a nutshell. He may eventually burn through what he feels about Sherlock, but until that happens, John Watson is not romantically available. Dammit. “Can I stand you something in the café anyhow?”

Mary actually laughs at this. “You really ought to. It’s the least I deserve, since clearly I’m not getting a whipping out of the immense investment I’ve made in time and emotion here.”

As it turns out, the history Mary specialized in at uni was that of Central Asia — “I heard the phrase
‘Silk Road’ when I was about six, and that was it, sucked in forever” — so she has a richer and broader understanding of Afghan politics than John does, the view from the middle of a firefight in Helmand being about as narrow as a view can be.

When they’re done with their coffee and snacks, she winks at him and, gaze lowered, takes their plates back to the counter, then comes back and stands with her hands behind her back, eyes on the floor. John clears his throat. “That’s … that’s quite hot, actually,” he says. “A bit forward, mind you, taking the initiative like that, are you sure you’ve read the handbook all the way through?”

Mary grins and drops back into her seat. “Just giving you a taste. I — Look, I’ve enjoyed this, and, well, maybe I’ll still be single when you’re available again. Keep my contact info, okay?”

“I will,” he says, meaning it, and he kisses her on the cheek when they part — “Here’s a taste for you in return” — gripping her arms just above the elbow to hold her in place for a moment.

Mary shakes her head and gives a one-sided smile when he releases her. “Somebody’s lucky. I hope they know it.”

John watches her, brisk through the crowds along the Euston Road. He feels wistful — in a different lifetime, if he had never met Sherlock … But this isn’t that lifetime; and in this one, he suspects, it’s not a question of when he’s going to be available to anyone besides Sherlock. More like if.

*

maths-at-ucl posted:

Dr. Watson, don’t you think Sherlock is sooooooo sexy

maths-at-ucl posted:

Do you suppose he ever misses me?

maths-at-ucl posted:

I wonder whether he ever thinks about old times.

maths-at-ucl posted:

Here’s a bit of a poem he might like:

Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,

Youth’s a stuff will not endure …

“Sherlock,” John says, “there’s this genuinely creepy guy …”

A new issue of the Journal of Forensic Sciences has just appeared online, so Sherlock doesn’t even look up from his screen. “I did make you an administrator on the site. If someone’s bothering you, just delete him.”

“It’s not me he’s got a thing about,” John mutters, but there’s no getting Sherlock’s attention when there’s no getting Sherlock’s attention. John deletes the posts and, for good measure, bans maths-at-ucl.
The case of industrial spying at Northrop Pharmaceutical is based, roughly, on “The Adventure of the Second Stain,” in which the spying is political and a missing letter may cause a war. Doyle’s Holmes comes to the wife’s rescue, but in doing so he ignores the problem of leaving the mole in place. Queen and country, Mr. Holmes? Tsk, tsk.

The photos from the 2012 Wellcome Image Awards Exhibit supply backdrop for John and Mary’s not entirely crappy not exactly date. Please ignore the fact that my chronology has ceased to make sense.

"maths-at-ucl" is quoting the Clown's song from Act II, Scene 3 of Twelfth Night.
Here are the monsters we put in the box

Chapter Summary

Jim does so enjoy his little pranks.

Chapter Notes

Do we simply stare at what is horrible and forgive it?
Here is the river, and here is the box, and here are
the monsters we put in the box to test our strength
against.

— Richard Siken, “Snow and Dirty Rain”

Although I said I wasn't going to warn for specific crimes except for the chapter
with explicit sexual abuse, this chapter does describe an offstage crime that pretty
much any non-Jim person would find especially distressing. See the endnote for
more information.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Almost every day, the man who is the British government itemizes.

Item: His younger brother has not used cocaine in [nine years, two hundred fifty-three days; ten
years, three hundred one days; twelve years, four days …].

Item: His younger brother has work that, for the most part, engages his intelligence.

Item: His younger brother has a home.

Item: The names of his younger brother’s friends now comprise a list, rather than the citation of a

Item: John Watson.

The man who is the British government considers that perhaps all these things, taken together, might
signify that Sherlock has at last, out of the wreck of the years between their mother’s death and the
end of his cocaine addiction, arrived at something like happiness.

It’s not Mycroft’s business, of course, and it hasn’t been his business in nearly twenty-five years, not
even before the evening when he saw Sherlock flinch from Jim Moriarty’s hand and turned his gaze
away. He considers the irony that he has apparently been unable to turn his gaze from Sherlock
since, and then he orders Anthea to lift the surveillance, and then he sits at his desk with his head in his hands for precisely four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. At four minutes and thirty-eight seconds he lifts his head, blinks his dry eyes twice, stands up, and opens his office door to greet the German head of intelligence, for whom it will never do to be late.

* 

Mycroft’s surmise is not as far from the truth as it once would have been. Sherlock has, at least, arrived at a condition of not-misery, at a condition of reason-enough-to-remain-alive, at a condition of daily labor at the task of attempting to be content.

He’s all over the media, as well; everybody and their sister seems to have a telephoto lens, and a pale, otherworldly-looking detective who has recovered a lovely Orissan sandstone sculpture of a woman, dating from the thirteenth century and stolen from the British Museum, turns out to be quite the draw after, at what one might otherwise have expected would be a rather staid sort of press conference, he points out to his erstwhile clients that the sculpture had essentially been looted by its colonial acquirer in the first place.

* 

Sam Pope the Guildford botanist gives the Sun (the Sun! Sherlock is indignant) an interview, headlined “Wine Experts’ Dirty Bouquet,” featuring (of course) an enhanced account of Sherlock’s playacting. Pull quote: “I could have sworn the detective was dying — but it was all a ruse.” Four coworkers and Bill Murray send John the link. “Sam Pope wasn’t even there!” John fires back, five times. There’s also a photo of John and Sherlock at Angelo’s, heads close together over dinner and evidence. Caption: “Clues to Romance?” John signs up for the free £10 Tesco’s voucher offered further down the Sun’s home page because, fuck’s sake, ten quid is ten quid.

* 

An immense “floral arrangement” arrives at Baker Street — for Sherlock, not for Mrs. Hudson and not misdirected. Dog roses, syringa, periwinkle: bound together and set off against wax myrtle and, of all things, parsley. Someone laid out considerable dosh for an ill-assorted crowd. Sherlock sets the box (plain, unprinted; delivery by messenger service, paid in cash) and bouquet on the kitchen table, dons exam gloves, undoes the ribbons, inspects each stem and leaf, each corner and glued edge of the box. There is no card. The roses’ thorns have been stripped, so evidently no mysterious criminal mastermind has invented an infallible botanical delivery system for undetectable and uniformly lethal poisons. Sherlock takes a turn around the table, frowning. Floriography, then, an obsolete code that anyway never had a single unambiguous and authoritative key. But the sender desired to convey a message, so would have relied on an easily accessible set of correspondences.

Wikipedia is little help and the sites that turn up for the search “floriography” include significations for only a few of the commonest plants … Aha, he needs “floriography dictionary,” because it’s not the subject of floriography itself that matters — yes. The third result supplies a comprehensive list. Dog roses: pleasure and pain. Wax myrtle: discipline, instruction. Syringa: memory. Periwinkle: sweet memories.

Most troubling: parsley. Useful knowledge.

Sherlock puts the bouquet back in its box, takes it downstairs, and bins it three streets away from 221. He takes care not to look around for Jim. As he turns back on to Baker Street, it occurs to him that if Jim is watching, the speed with which Sherlock disburdened himself of the bouquet will suggest to Jim that he’s rattled, when in fact he’s not, he’s simply … Here Sherlock draws a blank.
What was that bird again, Lestrade asks himself, the big rare parrot-y thing, the one whose existence Sherlock deduced from a single blue feather in a dealer’s loo? Hyacinth macaw, that was it. He hasn’t thought of it in years, but this day brings it to mind again. Like anything else living that may be smuggled, humans have the distressing tendency to die in transit if not properly sheltered, fed, watered: so today at Barts morgue, Molly Hooper and Sherlock Holmes are looking over the bodies of six of those not at all rare humans, the desperate.

The present dead are, presumably, a family. They were found in the cargo compartment of a lorry abandoned on empty ground off the M20 two days previous. Their coloring and their clothing brands, the adult women’s headscarves, suggest origins in the Arab world; the circumstances of their death, that they were refugees: odds not bad, therefore, that once upon a time they were Syrians. The lorry has been stripped of what seems to be every possible identifier, down to the tires; all the fingerprints belong to the five family members who were able to claw at the inside of the metal pull-down gate, which was naturally locked. The three-months’ infant, of course, took no part in that exercise; Molly has confirmed what everyone already knew, namely that she was smothered, presumably to spare her suffering. The other five died of dehydration and hyperthermia.

John is at the clinic; between patients he texts Sherlock find the bastards. Lestrade drives himself and Holmes to the scene.

Apart from the bodies’ removal, the lorry has been left as it was found. The pull-down gate of the cargo compartment is open. Sherlock draws a hand over his mouth and reminds himself that several days or a week ago, caring might have saved the family, but it offers no advantage now. Observe; deduce. Lestrade clambers up next to him in the shadowy space.

The answer proves easy to find. This might ordinarily be disappointing, but it will make John glad, so Sherlock is glad too. The Syrians had been locked in with a case of water; the empties are stood neatly in their cardboard flat. All of them have their caps on and many are filled with urine. Did the refugees try drinking it, only to discover how quickly it would sharpen their thirst? The shit bucket is covered with the plastic wrapper from the water case; they must have been trying to keep down the stink. “What tidy and hygienic citizens they would have made,” Sherlock remarks for the benefit of Anderson, who obliges with a sotto voce “Sick fucker.”

“Extraordinary, though, that they should have aligned all the labels so neatly,” Sherlock continues. “All … but … one,” and he pulls that bottle out of the cardboard flat. It hasn’t been pissed in. Alone of all the bottles it’s entirely missing the paper label. “Lestrade, your torch.” Sherlock examines every inch of the lorry floor and even the smooth walls, but finds no square or twist or scrap of paper anywhere. The passengers had been given toilet roll, of which some is left, so that’s not the use to which they put the label. Nothing whatever has been removed, Anderson insists. Molly Hooper has inventoried the contents of the dead people’s pockets and showed Sherlock the list: no paper label from a water bottle.

When is a wall not a wall? When it’s a ... sealed door. Standing inside the cargo compartment, Sherlock rolls down the gate, lit torch between his teeth, and, yes, there: folded and wedged into the minuscule gap between the interior handle and the metal of the gate itself. Sherlock steps aside for a bristling Anderson to photograph it in situ, then tweezes it out of its hiding place and reads: “AP13LMX,” in messy brownish letters. A vehicle number plate, registered in Norwich in 2013. There are also two brief words in Arabic, presumably the family names of the husband and wife.

“Written in blood,” Lestrade says, painfully.
“They had an ample supply of it from their attempts to force the lock,” Sherlock points out. He would like to study the paper longer, but Anderson is hovering with an evidence bag. Sherlock sighs and drops the label in. “Unfortunately for the people who run Death Lorries for Refugees, at least one member of this particular shipment wasn’t an idiot. He or she had the nous to guess that the number plate would be removed if untoward circumstances arose, to memorize it as they were being loaded up, and then to hide the paper just there, where the driver would almost certainly miss it while doing a bunk.”

Sherlock’s phone buzzes. Molly Hooper would phone Lestrade with any additional findings, not text Sherlock; Sarita emails; therefore it must be John, eager to hear what Sherlock has found, excellent —

BLOCKED NUMBER says: Look behind you, sexy.

Sherlock spins, stumbles, catches himself against the side of the lorry. How long has he been there how long who has seen —

(Even at the height of activity there would have been no one walking along the motorway to stop and stare, only drivers sightsee-crawling past; but the family of dead refugees in their anonymous coffin has been in all the papers; easy to surmise, then, if you were following a consulting detective’s career with any degree of attention, that he might be quietly brought into the investigation. Obvious.)

Jim is opening the door of a black Vauxhall Astra pulled up along the verge, giving a little wave like the Queen (Sherlock pushes off the lorry, a swimmer in a race) and getting in (fast, faster, he must); the door shuts thunk (Sherlock’s legs refuse to supply enough speed, he stumbles again and nearly falls); the car is gone, accelerating into the motorway traffic too fast to be sure of the model year or read the number plate. (The irony is not lost on Sherlock.) Anyway, whether the car is or is not Jim’s own, whether it does or does not bear its original paint, the man himself surely would not be hard to find. If, that is, Sherlock wanted to find him. He draws himself up to return to the lorry, but Lestrade catches him halfway.

“That bloke — ”

“Old client,” Sherlock replies shortly. “Don’t concern yourself.” Too late — so late, the DI has time to look sidelong at Sherlock and then open his mouth to speak — he realizes what Lestrade will take this to mean. “No, nothing to do with cocaine. You do realize I had a life before that — ” What is wrong with him? He’s behaving just like any of the dozens of blithering fools he’s interviewed, who, certain they are concealing everything, instead reveal all. A life before cocaine, indeed: Lestrade now knows just how old an acquaintance Jim is. Perhaps Sherlock should suck Jim off on the pavement in front of NSY, while he’s about it.

“All right,” Lestrade eventually says, “just looking out for you, mate. You get a bit of notice in the press, these days; never know what’s going to crawl out from under the rocks and head in your direction.”

* 

When Sherlock was about ten years old, he and his mother took a walk from the Turnworth Down and Shillingstone Hill, in Dorset. Shillingstone Hill was the site of numerous fairy rings, circular growths of mushrooms — not multiple organisms at all, Anna had explained, but the fruiting bodies of a sole, ring-shaped mycelium that thrived invisible, underground, depleting the soil of nitrogen and damaging the plant life near it. Perhaps, his mother had suggested, it was the hidden mycelium, fruiting out again and again, which gave rise to the belief that fairy rings could not be destroyed: even that it was bad luck to try.
Long ago Jim drew a circle around himself and Sherlock: bright and crisp, uncrossable.

*

When Sherlock walks John through the case, over supper that evening, he makes no mention of Jim’s appearance at the scene.

If Lestrade should mention it to John, and John inquire of Sherlock … well, Sherlock had any number of early clients whom he might be less than delighted to see. There will be no trouble making one of them stand in for Jim.

*

Sarita has written to say she’s been invited to spend six weeks aboard the Woods Hole research vessel *Atlantis*, a chance to study body temperature regulation by creatures living near north Pacific geothermal vents. Sherlock replies belaboring the intelligence of those who embark on ocean voyages from any base other than London, and hesitates only a moment before hitting Send.

*Alone protects me.*

*

Two mornings later, Sherlock is writing up his notes on the distribution of petechiae on the body of the refugee infant when a text comes in:

    BLOCKED NUMBER to SH, 10:47

    Take a look outside, sexy.

Sherlock freezes — only briefly, he reminds himself later, and wouldn’t it be easy to crane his neck from behind the curtain, but he doesn’t do that, he is not afraid, he looks directly out onto Baker Street, to see Jim across the way, looking in return at the kitchen window where he stands. The breath leaves Sherlock, making a noise on the way out like the noise a wet finger makes on the lip of a wineglass. Jim gives his Queen Mother wave.

It’s not Jim. Of course it’s not Jim. The man across the street resembles Jim as he was more than two decades ago.

Sherlock hauls on his braces, trying not to notice that he’s glad of the delay it causes — *I am not afraid*, he tells himself, *I am not afraid* — and goes downstairs.

The street is clear.

Absurd.

It’s important to learn as much as possible from the petechiae, it’s not that he wants to go back inside and make certain that the street door is locked and draw all the curtains and curl into the couch with his back to the room. That would be inadmissible, so he doesn’t admit it. He reminds himself that he’s almost out of cigarettes. There is money in his pocket, even. The newsagent is only a few doors away.

Sherlock is almost there when Jim steps out of the newsagent’s, waves, and steps into the cab that has just pulled up next to him. No, no, no, it’s not Jim. It’s another man made to look like Jim. Sherlock forces himself forward.
The newsagent’s is empty. “How long was that man here, the one who just left?”

Walid the newsagent hands Sherlock his cigarettes and change. “A good few minutes, Mr. Holmes. I had begun to wonder. Is he a villain you are pursuing, then?”

“No,” Sherlock says, which is the exact truth. The Jim impersonator is no villain but at most a pawn; Sherlock cannot be said to be pursuing Jim. On the pavement again, he lights a cigarette and turns toward home.

A man is standing in the doorway of 221. Sherlock is no longer surprised to see that it is “Jim.”

This one waves like the other two but doesn’t leave. Sherlock finishes the cigarette where he stands and then puts his hands in his pockets and squares his shoulders to approach. He breathes evenly, puts a friendly smile on his face. He takes his hands out of his pockets a few steps before the door, steps in front of the man, and seizes his lapels. He’s still smiling.

The man rocks back, wide-eyed.

His resemblance to Jim is all in broad strokes, for across-the-street and down-the-way viewing: the coloring, the height, the build; the hairstyle. His eyebrows have been tweezed to arch like Jim’s — a detail, but one legible at a distance. No further pains have been taken.

The three men were Jim exactly as a shadow is a hawk: a brief moving darkness to make a new chick flee.

This particular impersonator has been neglecting his teeth, and his smell is that of a person who eats far too much fast food. A constipated smell. He’s thin in the arms and legs, built slender like Jim; but, unlike Jim, flab-bellied. Or unlike the Jim of twenty years ago; impossible to have observed, in the brief look Sherlock got at him at the scene with the abandoned lorry, whether the dark coat of Jim New concealed any slight weight gain. The impersonator’s clothes are secondhand, Oxfam, but they’re Jim’s style, so bought for the purpose of this display; they tell Sherlock nothing about their wearer, and nothing he didn’t already know about Jim. The iPhone is the latest generation. The impersonator might be poor, judging by the teeth and the eating habits, and might have bought the phone on credit; but the physique and personal neglect say “computer geek”: a coder, maybe. He follows John’s blog and this is his idea of a lark; Jim would have placed an ad online.

But the shadow doesn’t matter; only the beast that made it matters. Sherlock gathers himself and lets go the suit jacket. “Sorry, sorry, got carried away. Such a thrill to see so many Jims.” He is almost sure he did not hesitate before the name.

Impersonator Man swallows and finds his voice. “Thanks, uh, Mr. Holmes. Yeah, Jim said it was a practical joke and you’d love it.”

Practical jokes were a feature of Sherlock’s life between the ages of eleven and sixteen. Then Sherlock learned how to be alarming and the incidence of amusements involving him dropped off steeply, though he continued to account for the possibility of their occurrence well into his time at university. “Ah,” he says now. “Yes. Yes, that was great fun. Do give him my regards when you collect your fee. In fact — why don’t I come along with you and say my hellos myself?”

“Oh, damn. I wish — See, he paid us in advance. Well, he had our references, so — ”

“Indeed. And here you were, reliable as day. How on earth did Jim find three such paragons of honesty?” This is too much, Sherlock is aware — even at so many years’ remove, he can hear the echo of Mycroft’s High Faggy-Bureaucratic. Still, if it gets the job done …
Impersonator Man shrugs. “Just Craigslist. I guess he had a lot of applicants, though.”

“He advertised under ‘Temp Jobs,’ did he?”

“‘Temp Jobs, Creative.’”

Sherlock chuckles appreciatively. Impersonator Man hasn’t noticed that he’s being questioned, which is to Sherlock’s purpose but also brings on that familiar stab of weariness/annoyance … (There is something else, too, Sherlock notes, another feeling alongside those; what …?) “So you phoned him, set up the meeting — did you all show up at once, at that Costa near his flat?” There is a Costa near almost everyone’s flat.

“Oh, no, none of us ever met him in person. Way it worked, we sent him a photo and references; if we fit his parameters” (Parameters, Sherlock thinks, not rolling his eyes, reminding himself that he is a pleasant fellow whose old mate Jim has just played a joke on him) “our height and weight and that, he sent us a picture of himself and told us what to do. Paid in advance for the eyebrows, too. Dunno how girls can stand it, the plucking.” Impersonator Man moves his forehead up and down, apparently under the impression that this constitutes waggling his brows urbanely.

(The special combination of weariness and annoyance never arises around John, although John can be as obtuse and therefore frustrating as anyone.)

“That’s Jim for you. Bet he sent you to the same place he gets his hair and nails done.” (I wish John were here, Sherlock thinks, shocking himself.)

“I dunno about the other blokes — me, it was just a little salon around the corner from my flat.”

“Oh, where was that? I can’t imagine Jim picking any old shop at random.”

Impersonator Man can’t remember the name but manages an approximate address. He’s restless and starting to wonder, dimly, why Sherlock is so curious about his neighborhood spa, so Sherlock casts the glamour of flattery by asking for a business card (“I never know when I’m going to need someone tech-savvy on a case”) which affords him the opportunity to pick I.M.’s pocket, and lets him go.

(Loneliness. The name for the third sensation woven in and through those of weariness and annoyance is loneliness. Sherlock stands blinking outside his door for some moments.)

*

For purposes of information gathering, I.M.’s wallet is a distant second to his phone, but even Sherlock can’t as a rule lift a phone out of someone’s hand without the theft being noticed, so the wallet it had to be. Credit cards, driving license, thirty-five pounds. A list of email addresses and passwords, now — that could have been useful, but I.M. has some sense and there is no convenient scrap of paper bearing the skeleton key for his entire life. No receipt from the nail salon, though I.M.’s description of the place is enough to enable Sherlock to find it, and no receipt from the tailor. Stupid not to have got the tailor’s name; Jim would have had to arrange for the suit to arrive there. Perhaps he even appeared in person —

Oh, what does it matter? What does Sherlock think he’s going to accomplish by retracing Jim’s steps to reach Jim himself — will there be an opening of negotiations? Sherlock has nothing that Jim could possibly want, except for the life he has made for himself.

He tosses the wallet on the coffee table and glares at it. Useless. And Sherlock is uncomfortably aware that John would want him to return it. Suppose John saw it, he would ask about it, and make a
disapproving face when he learned that Sherlock had pickpocketed it, and then he would demand that Sherlock return it —

*Fine.* Sherlock finds an envelope and puts the wallet in it, with a note: “This was outside my flat; must’ve slipped out of your pocket at some point.” Would John be pleased that these words reflect the strict truth? The wallet *was*, after all, outside Sherlock’s flat, during the time its owner was standing there in possession of it. And it did slip out of I.M.’s pocket: between the index and middle fingers of Sherlock’s left hand while I.M. was opening his card case. Sherlock could point all this out to John; John would rest his forehead in his right hand to denote exasperation, then perhaps he would rub the bridge of his nose, and finally he would slowly, helplessly, dissolve into laughter.

Sherlock returns to writing up his notes about the Syrian infant’s petechiae.

* *

Sherlock skips physio.

SH to JW, 17:03

Busy with experiment tonight. SH

This piques John’s curiosity, because except when delivering imprecations (*Idiot*) or ukases (*Come at once*) Sherlock inclines to the discursive. Dr. Watson therefore takes a shot at the peremptory:

JW to SH, 17:07

do tell

On reflection, that isn’t so peremptory, but it gets back:

SH to JW, 17:09

Recoagulation following liquefaction of already coagulated blood. SH

JW to SH, 17:12

what sort of blood?

SH to JW, 17:14

What sort do you think? Unbeknownst to myself, have I taken up the study of the capybara? SH

John snorts over his roti canai.

It does occur to him that Sherlock has more than once conducted an experiment while John sat on the sofa shouting at the football; but, he supposes, this one must be more vulnerable than usual to momentary distraction.

The matter doesn’t worry him, exactly.

Though, also, it doesn’t not.

* *
why he’s irked to find that John is so easily misled.

* 

It’s “Science of Deduction, or Miracle? Autistic Boy Found Unharmed” that really sets off the human interest brigade. Finn Lenardon, aged nine, wanders off in a heavy rainstorm at dawn on a Monday; tracking dogs and a London-wide publicity campaign turn up no sign of him.

Sherlock is brought in by Finn’s parents at midday Tuesday. After all of ten minutes looking through Finn’s room, he announces that the child’s dozens of meticulous pencil drawings represent patterns of water flow and that Finn has followed the storm runoff down the nearest drain. The drain cover, and the crowbar Finn used to pry it up with, still lie beside the opening, unnoticed by earlier searchers, or tagged as irrelevant. Down the Ranelagh Sewer go Sherlock, John, two PCs, and a pediatrician on call to the Met. It is more than possible that the fast heavy storm has swept away and drowned the child, or will when it resumes.

Thank God for waist-high waders and paper suits. The Ranelagh Sewer is fed not only by London’s toilets but also by many storm water intakes, as well as, farther downstream, the overflow from the Serpentine. The rain that drew Finn’s attention has thinned the stink enough that at odd moments John is distracted from clenching fear for the child, by the beauty of the tunnel arches, so carefully made and brilliant in the light of the searchers’ torches. Fancies strike John: they are in the hollow skeleton of a great beast, or in a cathedral for dragons. (What would dragons worship? Perhaps only other dragons.) Then the smell strikes him anew and he thinks, Skeleton, hell; intestines is more like it. The sole member of the search party not gagging at intervals is Sherlock, so absorbed is he in working out which direction Finn went in from the flow patterns he drew most often and therefore must have found most appealing.

It’s not easy to keep to the shallow bits. John’s thoughts shuttle: Finn stands a hundred and twenty-five centimeters tall and the post-storm current is strong in places. He has not got waders, of course, but then waders are heavy and perhaps he will be safer, if dirtier, without them … Antibiotic prophylaxis will be required. If he’s alive, if he’s alive … Sherlock stops only to look back and forth between the water and the dozen or so of Finn’s drawings he has brought with him in clear plastic covers. John reminds himself that the Lenardons had taught their son to swim: He loves the water. The father wept as he said it. … The skepticism coming off the PCs and the pediatrician presses at John’s back. An hour passes, two. John gets to worrying not only about Finn but also about Sherlock’s legs; he’s well rested, for Sherlock, and a relaxed walk of a few hours is well within his normal limits, but this is hardly a relaxed walk —

“Ah,” says Sherlock, quietly: a human figure perches two steps up a ladder in the Serpentine Infall Chamber. The air here verges on breathable. Bent forward to watch the liquid in motion below him, Finn is small enough to sit on the narrow rung. Sherlock, John, and the PCs remain where they are. The pediatrician approaches the ladder; Finn screams. She has taken one more step when Sherlock grabs her and hauls her bodily backward. “He’ll bolt, you idiot, and if he bolts instead of following a pattern, as he has done up to now, I will not find him again and neither will the overwhelmed noses of the Met’s best dogs, so don’t move.”

When they are all returned to their original positions, Finn quiets. There being no signal in the tunnels, one of the PCs needs to get aboveground to radio their location so that his parents can be brought to him, but the searchers dare not budge. Sherlock, having been in the lead, is closest to Finn; at first, John isn’t sure he’s speaking, for his voice is directed only at Finn, the baritone rumble nearly lost in the sound of rushing liquid. What is he saying? It has a rhythm like poetry, and unlike English. It draws Finn in: he makes a quarter turn toward Sherlock, and his lips are moving. They are speaking in unison, it seems. Eventually, Sherlock falls silent and Finn speaks. With his body turned
toward Sherlock, his face still averted, he eyes Sherlock sidelong. He appears to conclude a thought, continues watching Sherlock. Sherlock says a few words with a questioning intonation. Finn looks away but does not otherwise respond. They all wait. A minute passes; another minute. Sherlock looks relaxed, but is that a lie or the truth? Finally Finn wraps his arms around himself, nods, blinks rapidly. Sherlock doesn’t turn, but he has pitched his voice to carry: “The PC in back should walk upstream” — that is, away from Finn — “and out the nearest access point. We’ll await Finn’s parents here.”

Twenty minutes pass before the Lenardons arrive, clumsy-fast in their protective gear, wrinkling their noses and calling Finn’s name so it echoes along the water and down the tunnels. John would have guessed the noise would dismay Finn, set him screaming as the pediatrician’s approach did, but instead he orients toward his parents’ voices and commences skipping the fingers of his right hand down his left forearm, like a dance — no, Sherlock’s face has lit with pleasure, so John lays a bet with himself that it’s a code, and that Sherlock is reading it. When the Lenardons reach the group of searchers, Finn hops off the ladder and walks toward them, still finger-skipping, only he does something that makes John’s throat go tight: he pauses at Sherlock, turns his head completely away, and taps out a sequence on Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock speaks a response, and then Finn’s parents are upon them. They pat his shoulders, pat pat pat pat pat — it must be a Finn-accepted way of showing affection — while around Sherlock a general hubbub arises, with everyone shaking his hand and clapping him on the back. Even in waist-high waders, apparently, Sherlock can twirl: he executes a neat spin, ejecting himself from the small crowd, and is halfway up the nearest access ladder before John has the presence of mind to follow.

As the noses of the aboveground team aren’t numbed by hours of sewer time, the miasma around Sherlock and John puts a quick end to the second round of handshaking and back-clapping — just as well, for Sherlock’s obvious boredom and annoyance have begun tipping over into deduction and insult by the time the last tribute is laid at his feet. They strip off the protective gear for some hapless PC to take away. Then there’s nothing to do but lean against a building and wait for the car that the Met, to its credit, has offered them.

Seeing Sherlock’s temper, John has determined to keep his mouth shut, but no sooner are they alone than Sherlock is tsking at him. “Out with it, before you gag on your own curiosity.”

“All right,” John says, obligingly, “what were you saying to Finn?”

“I was reciting the Navier-Stokes equations.”

“The — ?” But John surprises himself: he remembers the Navier-Stokes equations, or rather remembers that they exist and that they describe fluid dynamics; the equations themselves are a blank. “Jesus, you know the Navier-Stokes equations by heart?”

Sherlock delivers a narrow look.

Not for the first time, John wonders what it must have been like for this tall pale stranger amid the common-or-garden schoolkids. “You figured Finn would know the equations, because of his drawings?”

“No; does no one ever notice anything? I expected he would know the equations because I read the titles of the textbooks on the stand beside his bed. He might have made the drawings without understanding the mathematics, simply on the basis of his own observation and intuition. Or even” — sneer — “aesthetics.”

John thinks of Sherlock, violin at his shoulder, transfigured. “Like you and Bach?” he asks, just loudly enough to be heard. For that matter, Sherlock himself must have taken note of the aesthetics of
water flow: otherwise how could he envision the possibility?

Sherlock ignores him. “In any event, the hearing of familiar mathematical formulae seemed likely to encourage him to remain. Desirable, given the trouble I went to to find him.”

An observer might take Sherlock’s expressed motivations at face value: the pleasure of rubbing people’s noses in his own cleverness will account for his eagerness to solve the puzzle “Where did Finn go?”; the self-aggrandizing display of his observational skills will account for the hours spent wading through a sewer after the boy; the ego gratification of success will account for the recital of equations so that the boy, once found, will not flee at random and thereby undo the results of Sherlock’s brilliance. The arrogance, the self-display, the sheer bloody craving to win — all these are real parts of Sherlock, and it would be foolish to think of him as, in any usual way, nice … Yet when John thinks of him reciting the equations to Finn, pitching his voice only to Finn, soothing Finn, the entire structure of his public explanation of himself is gainsaid. John loves him to the point of terror.

“Piss-poor job you did down there of showing off,” he says now, out of this feeling. “Nobody even knew you were talking but Finn and me.” John would want to put his mouth to the flush that appears on Sherlock’s neck at this, but for the bitter and familiar accompaniment of seeing him taken aback by affection. All right, that and the stink. He doesn’t ask what Finn tapped out on Sherlock’s arm — that’s private to Finn — and Sherlock doesn’t offer. If there’s something vivid in the silence that falls, it’s yet not uneasy.

The Met’s driver applies something that smells of menthol to his philtrum and locks the car windows all the way down. John can’t blame him. The two of them are dropped each at his own flat, dinner and telly being out of the question without a thorough wash and a change of clothes. Besides, even pigheaded Sherlock is drooping by now, and left on his own may be willing to admit the need to rest his legs and to sleep.

*

Back at his bedsit, John bins every article of clothing he has on; he showers, and showers, and showers, and then sleeps as hard as he has since, perhaps, Guildford.

*

Sherlock’s neurologist has told him that, although the evidence is incomplete, postpolio syndrome properly treated usually gets no worse than the first bout of disease had been, and may not progress even that far. “So there’s every reason to expect that you’ll always be able to walk, though eventually you may need crutches.” Sherlock thinks of climbing over roofs, of shimmying up drain spouts, of hunting an autistic boy down the currents and eddies of London’s sewers. He tries to identify the ache in his sternum as exhaustion, and at last he sleeps.

*

In the morning John finds forty-seven texts from newspapers and crime blogs and autism help groups on his phone, along with one from Bill (“Well done, you”), one from Harry’s ex (“You’re famous!”), and one from Sherlock (“It’s worse in Baker Street — SH”), and draws back his curtains to find a clot of photographers and reporters waving below. Mum and Dad Lenardon have been profuse in their expressions of gratitude, it seems.

JW to SH, 07:43 Wednesday

what’s worse in baker street? the smell?
John takes his own advice, “No comment”ing and “Excuse me”ing his way through the crowd as he leaves for the clinic. When a sharp-faced dark-haired bloke smilingly thrusts a manila envelope, size C4, at him he takes it reflexively, then tries to hand it back; the man has already turned and stepped out of the crowd, is hurrying off down the pavement. John frowns, but okay, maybe this is a prospective client who for some reason doesn’t want to send an email via Sherlock’s site. He tucks the envelope into his rucksack and forgets about it till he’s getting his sandwich out at lunchtime. Odd that the man didn’t give it to Sherlock but to him, though maybe John is seen as a sort of conduit to Sherlock; still, why —

Why indeed. Why a crisp color photo of an adolescent male torso, nude? It’s … unpleasantly weird, is what it is. John sets aside his uneasiness and studies the image, trying to be Sherlockian about it. No visible marks. The skin is pale but, unless the color’s been altered, healthy-looking. The boy whose skin it is has reached puberty; there’s not much hair around his nipples, but he’s beginning to come into his musculature. His nipples are erect and there’s a flush on his upper chest: was he sexually aroused when this was taken? It looks as if he was. John’s unease ticks up a few notches. Who takes a picture of a turned-on adolescent and then hands it out, to boot?

Nothing written on the back of the photo. Nothing else inside the envelope. Might there have been fingerprints? John thinks the dark-haired man wore gloves, but the fact that he delivered the envelope doesn’t mean he’s the photo’s maker and, anyway, whoever that was might have been careless in handling the photo itself. John holds it by the edges as he replaces it, then drops the whole thing into a bigger envelope yet, to bring to Sherlock and, depending on what his friend makes of it, to the
Nearly a year has passed, and on the night in question John was sleepy to begin with, besides which the light was dim: so, though he notices the scattered moles on the torso in the photograph, he doesn’t recognize them.

*  

Sherlock’s got plans to look at a maybe-not-strangling victim with Molly Hooper, if Lestrade doesn’t have anything for him, and the clinic has evening hours on Wednesdays so John isn’t free anyway. He does have time on his dinner break to drop off the envelope at Baker Street. (John, about a month and a half previous: “Here’s your key, Sherlock, I’ve brought the takeaway”; Sherlock, with maximum lordliness: “Oh, keep it. Spare me the tedium of repeatedly having to tell you where a key is, since you can never work it out for yourself”: that is, the rudest iteration ever of “Here, you should have a key to my flat.”)

JW to SH, 13:45 Wednesday

one of the reporters this morning handed me an envelope with a photo. bit disturbing. tell me what you make of it. maybe for police? will leave on 221B kitchen table.

SH to JW, 13:52 Wednesday

If you insist. But put it in the cupboard with the heavy metal samples from that poisoning in Leeds. SH

*  

Sherlock gets home near midnight. He takes a moment to savor the signs that John has been there: a scuff of dried mud on the mat by the door; on the coffee table, a bag from Pret, which he knows will prove to contain a pain au raisin; the faintest lingering hint of antiseptic cleanser in the air. Absently, eating the pain au raisin, he opens the cupboard with the heavy metal samples, one-handed shakes the smaller envelope out of the larger, and shakes the photo out of the smaller envelope.

He recoils so hard he nearly knocks over the kitchen table.

The photo lies on the counter, turned around so the boy’s shoulders are at the end closer to Sherlock.

Sherlock leans against the table, panting. “Yes, just like that. Don’t move a muscle.” Click-whirr. “Open yourself up. Little slut. You should see what you look like.” Click-whirr. How can he possibly have forgotten?

From the welter, two conclusions surface.

The first is: John didn’t recognize me.

The second is the certain knowledge of what Jim will eventually do with the photographs. There is no room to maneuver, except perhaps to postpone that end.

*  

SH to JW, 00:34 Thursday

Photo digitally altered. No prints but yours. Little to be made of it absent original file. SH
JW to SH, 07:20 Thursday

why give it to *me,* though?

SH to JW, 07:28 Thursday

Not on account of your skills as a detective, of that we can be sure. Can you describe the giver? SH

JW to SH, 07:35 Thursday

hell. darkhaired bloke, bit taller than me. maybe my age? didn’t notice his clothes & he didn’t say anything.

JW to SH, 07:36 Thursday

just smiled. smarmy.

SH to JW, 07:55 Thursday

Eyewitness testimony is almost always rubbish, and here we have another instance of that truism. SH

SH to JW, 07:57 Thursday

Beautiful in its way. SH

JW to SH, 08:01 Thursday

wanker. so nothing to be done? lestrade?

SH to JW, 08:03 Thursday

What of a criminal nature is depicted in the photo? SH

JW to SH, 08:08 Thursday

right, ok. still don’t like it. bad feeling.

Sherlock doesn’t reply.

*

John gets a seat on the Tube — O frabjous day! — but spends most of the trip to work staring at his phone and failing to enjoy his good fortune. Sherlock could surely make something of that photo, anonymous torso, anonymous background, and all. He could surely make something of the way the sharp-faced dark-haired man handed John the envelope and then slipped off. Sherlock always texts rapid-fire; why did it take him twenty minutes to respond to John’s description of the man?

Something —

Oh, God. Sherlock knows that man. And the boy in the photograph —

*

Sherlock paces the flat. He pulls his hair. He mutters. None of it helps. He hasn’t slept since the night after finding Finn Lenardon; now every resource appears to have been expended in the task of
misdirecting John. He looks at the photograph. He sets the photograph down. He climbs over the coffee table; he lies down on the couch with his back to the room. At least the pressure of the cushions against him is comfortable. He starts an email to Sarita and deletes it. Several texts come in from Lestrade, but he ignores them.

*

John has a well-honed ability to practice medicine attentively under fire: a benefit to him and his clinic patients on days like this, not that he thinks he’s ever had a day “like this.” On the other hand, battle may not be good preparation for whatever awaits him at Baker Street this evening. He lets himself in downstairs but hesitates at the door of Sherlock’s flat: yes, he should ask permission to enter, as a sort of early warning for the conversation he more or less expects to have.

Naturally, when he has wasted about three seconds dithering and has raised his hand to knock, Sherlock opens the door, clad in his blue dressing gown and his most supercilious expression. His gaze is aimed slightly above John and to the right. “Yes, bravo, you’ve worked it out, clap clap, congratulations, Detective Watson.”

Sherlock’s tactic of directing attention to his snark and brains, thereby to draw it away from any inconvenient emotions he may be having, no longer works well on John, but it seems like kindness to play along. “You get that from me standing outside the door?”

“It could hardly be more obvious. Weeks have passed since you last troubled to announce yourself by knocking. You always let yourself in with your key.” (Wait, really? Yes, John realizes, it’s true.) “In spite of your penchant for mayhem, you are a creature of habit: you never fumble for your keys, because they’re always in your right-hand coat pocket — or your trouser pocket, in warm weather. In addition, you let yourself in downstairs so your keys were already to hand. Not looking for your keys, then; no, you were hesitating. Why: because you want to broach a matter you consider delicate. What matter? Only one topic suggests itself. If you wanted to discuss the photograph in impersonal terms, as evidence of a crime, no feelings of delicacy would obtrude themselves. Therefore you’ve concluded, correctly I’m afraid, that the youth depicted in the photograph is me. I therefore repeat: bravo, clap clap, well spotted.” Sherlock hasn’t moved away from the door.

A wave of words: did Sherlock think they would sweep John away, down the stairs and out onto the street? They do, John reflects, smell of bullshit. “Right,” he says, “brilliant as usual, and now may I come in?”

“By all means. Vous êtes chez vous,” and Sherlock executes a little bow and stalks over to the fireplace.

Vous. John has no facility for languages and his primary-school French has long since evaporated, but he does remember the difference between tu and vous. He hangs up his jacket extra neatly, thinking over everything Sherlock has just said. “Should we do that, then — talk about it like a crime scene, I mean. Would that help?”

Sherlock sniffs. “I don’t see why we should ‘talk about it’ at all. You’ve happened across evidence of some ancient history. Let it go.”

“‘Ancient — ’ Sherlock, how old were you when that photo was taken?”

“Fourteen. Fifteen. One of those. What does it matter?”

“You know as well as I do why it matters: because if that photo shows what I can see plainly that it shows, you were being sexually abused. ‘Ancient history,’ Christ.”
“Oh, please. The affair was entirely consensual.”

“You’re going to tell me the man who arranged for me to be handed that picture yesterday was looking out for your well-being?”

Sherlock looks away.

Watson, you arsehole. “Sorry, I’m sorry, I — Look, I’ll fix us some tea. Do us both good to catch our breath.”

No response, but no objection, either. John steeped the tea far too long, putting an extra spoon of sugar into Sherlock’s on top of the three he normally takes. Sherlock has tucked himself into a corner of the sofa, legs drawn up, arms wrapped around his legs. John sets down the mugs and sits too, trying to gauge the sweet spot between crowding Sherlock and appearing to distance himself. “Oh, stop it,” Sherlock says, irritably. “I know what you’re doing. Empathize with the poor victim, encourage him to talk about the experience, suggest a support group for survivors, et tedious cetera. Not interested.”

“No. Because you are just the sort of person I can imagine benefiting from hugs and affirmations. Support group, absolutely, my first thought.”

Sherlock produces a noise that is at least a little like a laugh, and a microscopic quantity of tension leaves his shoulders, though he doesn’t yet look at John. He does take a sip of tea. “This is foul.”

“You’re welcome.” John thinks about how to try again. “Thing is, it’s the same guy, isn’t it? The one who kept leaving weird comments on the blog.”

Sherlock looks blank.

“Knew you weren’t paying attention. This was a couple of weeks ago. I say ‘weird’ — flirty weird. He went by maths-at-ucl” — Sherlock flinches — “and I wound up banning him. So, same guy.” Not a question, not after that flinch.

“ … Yes.” Sherlock sounds abruptly exhausted. “Yes, all right.”

John experiences a moment of nostalgia for Afghanistan. “So, did — did nobody know?”

“Mycroft and Jim knew, of course.”

“Jim being our … target, here.”

“Target,” Sherlock repeats, dry as bone. “You’re on fire. He was a doctoral student in mathematics at UCL; hence the username. Mycroft was — I don’t know. In love with him, I suppose.”

“So Mycroft — ”

“Pretended his younger brother wasn’t having sexual relations with his boyfriend, yes.” This all in a rush.

John’s head goes light. You went to bed with this man; what signals did you miss, what did you miss, what have you fucking well done to him? There’s probably no point in asking whether Sherlock went to the police, but he opens his mouth to ask anyway.

“Please,” Sherlock says, before the words are out.

“Right. So did you — Does anyone else know?”
Shrug. “Sarita. She found out well after the fact; she’d been in New York already for years.”

“Your parents?”

Another shrug. “My mother would no doubt have intervened, but she suffered from the great handicap of being dead. My father might also have intervened, I suppose, but he suffered from the great handicap of having moved into the drinks cabinet and closed the doors after him, to console himself for my mother’s being dead.”

At this, John kindles. He opens his mouth to speak, closes it, opens it again. “So let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re fourteen. Your mum’s dead, your dad’s a drunk, your older brother, what, stands by while his boyfriend perpetrates on you a, a, a funhouse mirror version of a sexual relationship to which you can’t possibly have had the self-knowledge and experience to freely consent, and you pass all this off as an affair?” He’s shouting. He shouldn’t be shouting at Sherlock. Sherlock is staring at him but, okay, he doesn’t look frightened; he looks surprised and … deductive. Yes. Okay, John has to say this if it kills him, because Sherlock — Sherlock — “Also. I am, sexually speaking, inclined to run the show. Among other kinks. And that time we went to bed — we hadn’t discussed anything, and I tried to make sure you were enjoying what we did, what I did, but now I see … Well. I would have reminded you of Jim the whole time, I guess. I must have missed every signal you were sending. And I am so, so sorry. You deserved better.”

There’s a beat, during which John forces himself not to look away from Sherlock, and Sherlock stares back at John, and then Sherlock … bursts out laughing. “‘Deserved better.’ It was Jim’s kind of treatment I wanted. I wanted to be hurt. I wanted to be humiliated. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. Not — not tenderness.”

The knowledge rises before John like a wall: everything he and Sherlock could have had. Stolen before they even met. Don’t be a selfish bastard, Watson. He shoves the wall aside. In his throat a furious banging has set up. “And — and you can’t have tenderness along with your hurt and humiliation? So you get what you want, and too bad you’re left feeling like a sack of rubbish?”

Sherlock presses his lips together; were his tells always that obvious, or is it just that John has been studying him, for nearly two years now, like a sacred text?

“Haven’t you ever even looked at, I dunno, articles online?” Before this question is out of his mouth, John knows how foolish it is: why would Sherlock find practitioners of BDSM, online or in person, any less alien and discomfiting than he finds any other assemblage of ordinary people? Anyway, Sherlock’s incredulous look provides all the confirmation John might need. “Right, forget I asked.”

Another silence descends on them. Eventually, John thinks to wonder: “So you got rid of him all on your own?”

And there is Sherlock Holmes looking puzzled, because of course how else would an adolescent escape from a sexual abuser except all on his own? “One day I refused his attentions.”

“And that was that?”

“Well, not quite. I, um, did some judicious cutting and pasting of text to make it appear he had plagiarized his doctoral thesis. He was dismissed from the program, of course.”

John is surprised into laughter, for a moment; but then he thinks again of the photograph that started this conversation. “Only now he’s stalking you, isn’t he?”

Sherlock makes a face.
“Oh. Not just the blog comments and the photo, then. There’s been more.”

“He looked in at a crime scene. There was a practical joke involving three impersonators planted along Baker Street. And he sent a bouquet.”

John finds that it is possible to reel while sitting down. “You’ve seen him? Spoken to him? Wait, what do you mean three impersonators?”

Sherlock explains, John pinching the bridge of his nose throughout. “Fucking Christ, why didn’t you say anything? No, strike that, I think even I can work out the answer, so tell me about the bouquet. Lovely gesture, I assume there was something significant about it.”

“Floriography.”

“Floriography.”


“He couldn’t have just put a note in?”

“He’s a mathematician, John, he likes a game. The flowers expressed a threat of exposure.”

“Blackmail, then.”

“Yes, that’s what ‘threat of exposure’ is normally taken to mean.”

Chalk one up for John Watson, Therapist to Sherlock Holmes: that was almost a normal sneer. But Sherlock goes on:

“There are many more photographs, rather less anonymous than the sample you got. That was just Jim giving his audience a bit of a teaser.”

“I have a feeling I’m being thick, here, but doesn’t he have a lot to lose? Prosecutors get worked up about exploited fourteen-year-olds —”

“Oh, for God’s sake, John, I wasn’t naïve —”

“Yeah, I think we’re going to have to come back to that point —”

“— there aren’t any honeymoon snaps of the happy couple, only of me, and besides, you clearly haven’t been doing your reading on the subject of revenge-motivated stalkers. He’s not devoting logical consideration to the consequences to himself.”

John takes this in, wordless. Some moments pass.

Sherlock says: “You could make more tea.” He sounds quite like a person making a helpful suggestion.

“Um, you’ve barely touched that cup. I mean, sure, if you want, is it cold?”

“It’s what you do, John,” Sherlock says, patiently. “You make tea. You seemed be at a loss for what to say or do next, so I suggested a resort to your default behavior.”

Yeah, okay. I can do that all evening, and we’d wind up with a dozen mugs on the table and none of the tea drunk. Maybe I’ll just act it out, with an invisible kettle.”
Sherlock frowns. “You’re still angry.”

“Yes, I am. I am that. I am angry. You’re the most amazing human being I have ever met and this, this useless petty creep uses you against yourself, rips you up and bins you, and then comes at you again with this shit, and yes, I am, actually, homicidally angry. Do you want another cup of tea?”

“No. I — You don’t do that, then.”

A question and not a question. But: “Do what?”

The tsk of Sherlockian Why are you not able to keep all the threads of the past hour of conversation alive in your mind simultaneously? “Leave your partners, as you put it, feeling ‘like a sack of rubbish.’”

“I did you, didn’t I? But no, not intentionally. Christ.”

“Well,” Sherlock says, lightly, after a pause, “I did arrive pre-rubbished, as it were.” He springs up and begins to pace.

“That’s not true, you weren’t ‘rubbished.’” To this, Sherlock returns a tut so dismissive that there is no choice but to accept the subject is closed — for now, John promises himself. He returns to the immediate problem. “Okay, he fucking hates you. You think it’s because you ruined his career, but I’ll bet he hates you even more because you found it in yourself to kick him to the curb. But what makes this year special, and not last year or the year before?”

Sherlock pivots, paces, pivots. For several moments, John thinks he might not have heard the question. Pace, pivot; pivot, pace. Then: “We were at tit for tat. Get even and call it quits: he ruined me, then I ruined him.”

John notes for future reference that Sherlock doesn’t seem to have taken on board the idea that he did anything remarkable in extricating himself, or that his prey’s escape would have infuriated Jim. Also: Not ruined, Sherlock. But John has already delivered that objection, and Sherlock needs to think.

“As a sort of bonus to him,” Sherlock continues, “I went on to ruin myself further. But unless his surveillance capabilities rival my brother’s, I must, from his perspective, simply have disappeared from view …

“Again, close long-term surveillance is unlikely in the extreme, so while I was solving crimes for the police without public acknowledgment, I would have remained more or less invisible. But now …”

John blows out air. “Fucking hell. The blog.”

“The blog, yes. It accomplished the aim you intended for it: it brought me private cases, and made me less dependent on the Yard for my work. The private cases attracted notice. And notice has attracted Jim Moriarty. All entirely predictable, really. Except that I didn’t predict it.” He stops in his tracks and seems to falter, then reassembles his expression and posture into Deduction Mode and resumes pacing.

“However, here we now are. If he cares to draw this out, which on the basis of past experience I assume he does, then it behooves him to be cautious about whom he favors with a photograph and what precisely it depicts. On the other hand, he can’t hope to continue to … to take me aback by distributing images that are not recognizably of me. Soon, as he must realize, I would become inured. And again, the party becomes harder to keep going if anyone at the Met becomes aware that the photos depict me and that I was below the legal age of consent. Someone tactful drops by to question me, there is no longer any point in my dissembling, I give them Jim’s name: game over.”
“He won’t care about the consequences to himself, true, but he’ll want to prolong the game.”

“How creative is he?” John asks.

Sherlock sits, heavily. “Quite. Sexually, and also in other realms: it was a most original thesis before I had my way with it.” He lifts one corner of his mouth.

John casts about for ideas. “Could we break into his flat and take the photos?”

“Is there a correlation between your two-finger typing and this innocence of technology more recent than 1990? He may well have kept the originals, but he’ll have digitized copies, too.”

Again, Sherlock’s expression breaks; again, he reassembles it. There’s something he’s not saying, John thinks.

“Do you know,” Sherlock says at length, “I’ve never voluntarily discussed this. I accidentally revealed the truth to Mycroft, who would already have worked it out anyhow. Sarita guessed the general picture, but I’ve always refused to speak of it to her in detail. As of this moment, you know more than anyone. And eventually very many people will know. I don’t seem to be able to work out how to prevent it, short of murder. … What a pity I’m apparently not that kind of sociopath.” He turns and looks at John directly for the space of a breath, two breaths; then faces forward again. So softly John almost doesn’t hear it: “I’m not ready.”

John reaches for something useful to say, comes up dry. Sherlock’s hands are folded in his lap and his head is bowed. What can John do that will not fail his friend? What if touching Sherlock just spooks him? But John has nothing else to offer. Cautiously, making sure Sherlock sees the movement, as his hand approaches, he strokes Sherlock’s hair. Once. Twice. Then he gets up and makes them both fresh tea. Halfway through drinking it Sherlock says, “For God’s sake, order yourself some takeaway and see if that terrible program you like is on, the one with the vehicles.” Under the circumstances, John feels it’s to his credit that he recognizes this at once as a description of Top Gear.

*

John’s intuition is correct: there is something Sherlock isn’t saying, something that he doesn’t want John to work out even though he has, perversely, hinted at it. It is his knowledge of what Jim Moriarty’s endgame must be. How Jim will ensure that Sherlock never, ever leaves him behind again, as long as he lives. If John weren’t so technologically inept he’d have worked it out already; but for John not to know is somehow comforting, as though if he doesn’t know then a corner of Sherlock doesn’t have to know yet, either.

Sherlock shoos John out well before midnight (“You really okay? I feel like I ought to bodyguard you. What if he shows up here?” “He won’t. Go home, John. I’m fine”).

Of course he isn’t fine; he feels as if he’s constituted mostly of dread — though this dread, he now understands, has inhabited him for more than twenty years, a great central mass like a glacier. It’s only that he’s got used to it, having nothing to compare it with.

Now he has something almost like happiness to lose.

*

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu
Re:

John has learned of the episode involving Jim.

You may have had a point with respect to the attitude he would take.

Sherlock surprises himself by not only falling asleep almost at once after he emails Sarita but also staying asleep well into the Friday morning. He wakes to find that John has texted, first, a general hello; second, an invitation to deduce the composition and source of a vomit sample brought in by an all-too-enterprising patient; third, an inquiry about “our case” that he no doubt perceives as expressing tactful solidarity. John’s texts sound … like John, though he doesn’t often initiate exchanges while he’s at work. Sherlock texts back: “SMS system appears to be in order — SH”; “Simplest investigative course is to inquire of the producer and observe for signs of possible deceit — SH”; “Quiescent so far.” This last gets back, promptly: “hope no news = good news. remember am working late tonight” — the clinic’s open till nine every other Friday, and John covers one in three of those — “but give a shout if anything develops.”

Sherlock frowns at this. Suppose Jim escalates immediately, what does John imagine he can do? Yet when Sherlock compares the two conditions — John-present-as-Sherlock-manages-the-situation, versus John-not-present/etc.-etc. — he finds that he somewhat prefers the former.

And there is the thing John said. The thing that might, if Sherlock allowed himself to consider it in such a light, sound like a possibility. “Other kinks.” Kinks beyond being “inclined to run the show.”

Jim was not — and how is it possible that Sherlock never registered the import of this before now? — Jim was not different to Jim. There were not two separate Jims, one sneering his contempt at Sherlock, the other generous and affectionate in the rest of the world. The most one could say was that, much of the time, Jim could produce a plausible smile.

If John is like Jim in this one respect, if John is not different to John, then might protective and admiring John be protective and admiring still, with Sherlock on his knees?

Not that it matters. Because, living inside Sherlock, there will always be Jim: always and forever, Jim. World without end, Jim.

Sarita reads Sherlock’s email over her morning coffee aboard R/V Atlantis, off the western shore of Canada. Her first reaction is to exclaim, “Ha. Told you so.” As it is well known among U.S. biochemists, oceanographers, and ichthyologists that one does not approach Sarita Banerjee before she’s had her second coffee, no one does more than glance toward her. Sarita’s second reaction comes an instant behind the first:

From: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu
To: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com
Re: Re:

Told you so. But don’t think I missed that omission of agency, Mr. Consulting Detective. If you didn’t tell him, who did?

Sarita hits “Send,” chugs the rest of her coffee, blinks once, and then bangs her fist on the table.
“Shit,” says Professor Banerjee, loud enough for everyone in the mess to hear. “Shit shit shit shit shit.” Two dozen scientists and a dozen crew focus carefully on the plates in front of them.

Sarita debates emailing John, but Sherlock wouldn’t welcome the mother-henning; he would even have been angry with her for fetching John to him in hospital had he not been so desperately happy to have his friend restored to him. In the end, she writes to Sherlock again:

Please bear in mind that I’m not actually an idiot, and that you are not without friends.

She adds, “This is a worrisome development,” then backspaces over the sentence, because Obviously, Dr. Banerjee [eyeroll].

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com
To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu
Re:
Noted.

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com
To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu
Re:
Thank you.

* 

And words, little words,
words too small for any hope or promise, not really soothing

but soothing nonetheless.

— Richard Siken, “The Torn-Up Road”

Chapter End Notes
The unusually distressing crime: A family of refugees is locked in a van to die. Among them is an infant. The infant is smothered by another family member when it becomes apparent they will all die.

I was thinking of this sculpture when I wrote the paragraph about Sherlock at the British Museum, but my characterization of the first British owner is somewhat unfair. He was indeed a colonialist, but not, by miles, one of the most odious, and he had a pretty entertaining bee in his bonnet about saris vs. Western dress for ladies.

How number plates are assigned in the UK.

Wikipedia again for fairy rings, and for the information that those on Shillingstone Hill, in Dorset, have been studied for many years, which in turn seems to come from Amazing and Extraordinary Facts — English Countryside, by Ruth Binney. Unfortunately, Binney doesn’t supply references and I haven’t found the underlying research. Here, though, is a photo of a fairy ring and some info in French.

The site Sherlock uses to decode Jim’s bouquet is VictorianBazaar.com.

In general I’ve tried to keep Sherlock’s deductions within the bounds of — well, not plausibility, but at least bare possibility. His feat in tracking Finn through London’s sewers by means of flow patterns is preposterous in any universe, but for whatever reason it insisted on itself.

My information about the Ranelagh Sewer came from Silent UK, the website of an urban explorers’ group in London, which sadly seems to have disappeared in the interim. In its absence, take a look at Sub-Urban.com. Much of my other information about conditions in London’s sewers, and what protective gear is worn in them, comes from Peter Ackroyd’s wonderful little book London Under.

There’s a Wikipedia article about the Navier-Stokes equations, and wow am I impressed with Sherlock and Finn for understanding them. I can’t even really understand the words about them.

The UK has no statute of limitations on serious sexual crimes, so Sherlock could theoretically bring a criminal complaint against Jim. Yeah right.

The Woods Hole research vessel Atlantis has indeed been spending most of its time in the Pacific in recent years. Atlantis, Pacific: get it? Derp derp derp.
Holding the bullet up to the light

Chapter Summary

Inside the fairy ring.

Chapter Notes

They've been going at it for days now.
Getting the bullet out.
Digging out the bullet and holding it up to the light, the light.
Digging out the bullet and holding it up to the light.

-Richard Siken, “The Dislocated Room”

After the photograph, nothing.

A week passes. Ten days; twelve.

Again and again the image of the fairy ring appears to Sherlock: its hidden source, the secret mycelium, season after season sending up its poisons and marking off a space separate from everything around it. People are not stolen by fairies, the myth is ludicrous, even irritating in its absurdity, but surely Jim’s realm, where Sherlock is a subject, is baneful. Often it seems to Sherlock that to draw John closer to himself, and then Sarita after John — to draw them into the poisoned ring — was a mistake. It might have been better to watch them go about their business outside, untouched and uncontaminated. In that other world. That human world.

Too late.

*

At the two-week mark, John asks, doubtfully, “Do you think he — ” but is interrupted by Sherlock’s drawing in his chin and turning his head: right; left; right.

*

Quite early on the seventeenth day, Lestrade rings. By the tone of his voice, Sherlock knows who, and therefore also in a general way what. Lestrade will vouchsafe no details by phone, however.

Sherlock registers, as he passes through the main entrance to NSY, that his left foot drags over the threshold.

*

On Lestrade’s desk are three boxes, each of a size that would do for a couple of pounds of chocolates. They have been opened and then reclosed but not resealed. “Best sit down,” Lestrade says, “And glove up, will you?”
Pointless, because no prints anywhere near the boxes will be Jim’s. But the only shield remaining to Sherlock is Lestrade’s belief that the boxes represent a prank by a person unknown. Gloved, Sherlock pulls the first box over for inspection. Addressed to Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade, return address S. Holmes, 221B Baker Street. Both labels laser printed. He opens the box.

Two small figures, modeled in clay, nestle in a bed of wood shavings. One, in a standing pose, has cropped gray hair, dark eyes, a black overcoat; the other kneels naked at his feet. This other is pale, with black curling hair drawn in marker pen. A line of the same ink indicates a collar. His arms, too long to be in proportion, extend behind his back and meet at the wrists, where the marker signifies cuffs. The hands and feet are not detailed and the face is invisible, because it is pressed to the crotch of the one in the black overcoat.

Sherlock rests his wrists on the edge of Lestrade’s desk. He evaluates the position of his facial muscles. His belly trembles. “The quality of the modeling leaves much to be desired,” he says.

Lestrade sighs. “The other ones are pretty much the same. Guess you should have a look, though.”

Sherlock would prefer to douse them with paraffin and light a match, except that he needs to know what Lestrade has seen and to consider Lestrade’s possible reaction. The second box is addressed to Donovan; inside, the pale naked kneeling figure bends at the waist while a clothed female figure seems to drive into him from behind. Black bands around her hips and thighs, over her trousers, make a dildo harness. The female figure’s hair has the shape of Donovan’s style though no attempt has been made to render its texture. Her skin is a generic brown, as Lestrade’s was a generic beige and the naked figure’s is generically pale.

Third box. … Jim did better with Anderson: the pasty skin tone is right, and the clay achieves a tiny expression at once sneering and hangdog. This must be by luck, given the crudeness of the Donovan and Lestrade figures.

The naked dark-haired figure is on all fours and a bit of black embroidery thread is tied around his neck, the free end leading to the Anderson figure’s hand and disappearing into the clay as into a clutched fist. Sherlock closes the box.

“You arrived at the office early this morning,” he tells Lestrade.

“What? Yeah, yeah I did, what’s that to do with — ?”

Sherlock peels off the exam gloves and ties them in a knot. “Obviously, had Donovan and Anderson seen these, you and I wouldn’t be having this pleasant chat in your office; instead, I’d be in an interrogation room with some other idiot expressing insincere sympathy with my erotic frustrations in hopes of getting my confession to harassing three fine members of the Metropolitan Police.

Conclusion: you saw these packages before anyone else did; therefore you were early; you opened yours and embarked on a course of damage control that entailed lifting the ones addressed to Donovan and Anderson and ringing me. Have I missed anything?”

“Sherlock, listen — ”

“Yes, yes, in opening and retaining post addressed to others, you committed a criminal offense on my behalf, most grateful for your effort, I’ll take it from here, no need to give this bad joke a second thought.”

“Will you shut up? My point is that I’m not likely to be lucky enough to intercept the next one.”

“There won’t be a next one. He’ll come up with something different.”
“Funny you should sound like you know him.”

“And yet this is not an interrogation. I can deduce, Lestrade, that he’ll do something different next time from the creativity, however misplaced, that is apparent in *this* escapade.”

“You think John is the only one in the world who knows when you blather on you’re trying to hide something? Who sent these, Sherlock?”

“I’ve told you: I’ll take it from here.”

“Is it something to do with that bloke who turned up at the scene with the Syrian refugees?”

*Do not imagine that you can —*”

Lestrade looks at Sherlock; Sherlock presses his lips between his teeth and looks at the wall to Lestrade’s right. “We would seem — ” Sherlock begins, meaning to say “We would seem to be at an impasse,” but Lestrade shakes his head. He produces a carrier bag from one of his desk drawers and places the three boxes in it, then sets the bag and its contents at the edge of the desk in front of Sherlock. “Here, get these out of here. Deduce the living hell out of them. Run this maggot off. Just, don’t do anything I can’t help you out of trouble with, okay? Talk to John. I — ”

Sherlock nods, minutely, still not looking at Lestrade, picks up the carrier bag, and goes. It’s still morning.

*  

**JW to SH, 11:34**

you were right. had something today.

**SH to JW, 11:37**

Yes, the modeling-clay figures. You may as well bring the package with you tonight.

**SH**

*What*? John stares at his phone.

**JW to SH, 11:41**

no, an envelope. another photo.

**JW to SH, 11:42**

what package?

sorry.

**SH to JW, 11:44**

I’ll explain tonight.

Don’t be ridiculous. **SH**

*  

Sherlock sets the carrier bag from Lestrade on the coffee table and takes out the boxes. One, two,
three. Jim is, as ever, hiding in plain sight. Bog-standard office-supply-store boxes. Bog-standard white paper adhesive labels, laser printed in all capital letters, Times New Roman, 24 point, with the Scotland Yard and Baker Street addresses. Sherlock sniffs handfuls of the wood shavings from each box. Nothing. No whiff of cigarette smoke — Jim must have quit, like almost everyone else these days; it’s impossible to sustain a smoking habit in London anymore, though Sherlock is working hard at it these days — or of Jim’s familiar cologne. Sherlock tries not to be relieved about the latter. Data, he wants data, but he would have retched at the smell of that cologne.

The figures, then. Jim will have worn gloves for making these as he did for packaging them, so there will be no fingerprints, and supposing there were, what of it? Sherlock already knows the sender’s identity, and he would prefer that the Met not know, so there’s no point in looking for evidence of it.

The black thread leash that links the figures representing Sherlock and Anderson is a poly-cotton blend. Oh, fascinating. Jim Moriarty keeps a spool of black poly-cotton sewing thread in his flat. How revealing. No wonder there is only one consulting detective in the world.

Sherlock takes the figure of himself and the figure of Anderson one in each hand and rips the thread between them. He double-bags the boxes and their contents in his heaviest-duty bin liners and stuffs them into one of Mrs. Hudson’s bins. There’s nothing else to do.

* 

Jim didn’t deliver this envelope in person as he did the first; it came in the day’s post. It is, as far as John remembers, identical with the other, but if he had 5p for every Ryman’s own brand C4 envelope he sees in a week, he might object less strenuously to picking up Sherlock’s cab fare all the time.

The photo is in landscape orientation; impossible to know whether it was shot that way or cropped. It depicts a section of pelvis, the front of a pelvis specifically; specifically, Sherlock’s pelvis. Fifteen-year-old Sherlock’s pelvis. Or fourteen-year-old. His cock is hard, the foreskin retracted; a narrow black leather band is laced around and around and around it, balls to root to just below the head, snug enough to indent his flesh. His pubic hair isn’t entirely grown in.

The head of Sherlock’s pretty cock shines, wet presumably with lubricant or with his precome or both. A forefinger, not Sherlock’s, presses against the tip, at his urethra.

Sometimes, since Guildford, at night when he is alone and burning for Sherlock, John has allowed himself to imagine the texture of Sherlock’s cock, the marks a leather band would leave, Sherlock’s gasps as John teases his slit with tongue, with finger, with feather, with urethral sound. In the photo, Sherlock’s balls are tight: he must have been desperate with arousal and that, too, is something John has let himself imagine — how Sherlock would gasp and whine, how John would cup his face and kiss him, reaching down with the other hand to run a fingernail over his perineum and pinch the base of his sac. How long he would make Sherlock wait —

John has replaced the photo in its envelope, put the envelope in his rucksack, and zipped the rucksack closed and shut it away in his locker. Jim received the gift of acceptance and surrender and did not fall on his knees for love of the giver. And Sherlock was a child. And Jim took his gift and despoiled it. And the thought that Jim was the first, when John wants to be Sherlock’s first and last and only. And the sickness at the realization that he feels jealous of that piece of shit, who had he been worthy of Sherlock would never have touched him at all —

So John’s thoughts run all day, circling around and around a dense, lightless, and malignant star —

What else did he do to Sherlock what else —
Stop.

— did he do

Stop. Stop. Stop.

*

Sherlock would pace the flat but his weaker leg has been trembling in the brace since he left Lestrade’s office so he buys a pack of cigarettes instead and smokes half of them. Smelling the smoke, Mrs. Hudson comes in to frown at him and open the windows. As usual, Sherlock’s snapping and snarling impress her not at all, but being looked at by anyone right now is like being rubbed with sandpaper so he turns his face into the back of the sofa and stops talking altogether.

Even Martha Hudson, expert in Sherlock Holmes since the beginning of the century, is at a loss. She watches the back of her friend’s head for a while, and then resorts to “Fall asleep with one of those lit and I’ll be the first to tip a bucket of water over your head. And talk to John, dear. You know it’s not good for you to keep things from him.” With which, she goes.

Talk to John, talk to John. Why does everyone appear to believe that the thing to do is Talk to John, even people who have no idea what Sherlock doesn’t want to talk to John about?

*

By the time John arrives at Baker Street, he’s in a savage temper — with himself, with Moriarty, with the stupid bloody tourist stopped dead at the top of the escalator out of the Tube consulting his map. When Mrs. Hudson buttonholes him to say, “I’m so glad you’re here, love. He’s in a bad frame of mind today,” John comes within a hair of turning around to go home, because how can anything he brings with him this evening improve the situation? But Sherlock is expecting him, must of course already know he’s at the bottom of the stairs, and if John leaves, then Sherlock will draw all the wrong conclusions, or perhaps all the right ones, who knows which, and anyway John would loathe himself if anything he did let Sherlock believe for an instant that he, Sherlock, is the problem here.

Therefore: up the stairs, key in the lock because he’s not about to be deduced through dithering at the door again, Forward, soldier.

Sherlock is sat on the couch with his hands steepled. “Yes,” he says when John approaches with the envelope, and holds out a hand without looking up. But he must sense something — if John had to guess, he hears a hesitation in John’s gait — because all at once he alerts, glancing at John and then at the envelope.

Then back at John: where his gaze remains, while he presses the edges of the envelope to open it like a mouth, into which he reaches with thumb and forefinger to pluck out that speaking tongue, that photograph.

John waits, willing himself quiet.

At last, Sherlock looks at the photograph in his hand. He swallows. His cheeks color.

Distantly, John registers how beautiful that flushed discomfiture could be, in some other circumstance.

“This act arouses you,” Sherlock says, without inflection. He is still looking at the photograph.

“With a grown-up partner, yeah. Important qualification there.”
“What about it appeals.”

John is good at finding his partners’ pleasure and his own, not so good at analyzing the sources of that pleasure. He flounders.

“In your own time,” Sherlock says.

“I — okay.” John flexes his hand, clears his throat, and then finds that once he has started he can’t seem to stop: “The look of it. Like someone’s given you his cock, his — everything he wants right then, for you. His control over himself. How much he wants to come. Made you a present of it, and you wrap it up in a bit of black leather, and it’s so — he lets you do that, lets you take this very — it’s his *cock*, for God’s sake, you could do all kinds of damage, and he’s trusting you with it. To, well, to own it. Play with it, hurt it, let him feel he’s yours …” John’s mouth is dry.

“And, um. Well, it’s hard to come like that, with your cock tied up — ” *He knows that, you tit, it’s his cock you’re talking about.* “Right. So, uh, the other partner — ”

“You,” Sherlock supplies. At some point he has raised his eyes to John’s face again.

*You.* The word makes John’s chest hurt. Of all memories, the one that arises is not of the night they returned from Guildford but of the morning he woke to find Sherlock bleeding at his kitchen table: how Sherlock seemed almost to drowse as John took the third and last stitch and bandaged the wound. “Yeah, okay, me, I can, can draw it out — ”

“Or Jim.”

“Jim fucking Moriarty should *never have bloody seen this*, all right? It was for someone who, who” — John has to force the next word out — “loved you, okay, and cared for your pleasure, not for that piece of — ”

Sherlock’s voice, when he interrupts, is mild: “I remind you that I threw myself at him.”

“Did you, balls. After how much encouragement?”

Sherlock regards John for a long moment, pushes his lips into a prissy little moue and tilts his head: the usual signal he’s about to say something pointed. Instead he looks away again, into the middle distance, his expression quiet and absent.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock refocuses, sharp again, shakes his head. “It’s nothing of consequence.” He frowns down at the photo and slides it back into its envelope, now seemingly as bored as if it were a handbill offering cheap suits.

John pinches the bridge of his nose. “Look, Sherlock — ”

“Perhaps a curry tonight. I meant to tell you, there’ve been a few arrests in that refugee smuggling case you were so worked up a— ”

“*Sherlock.*”

Sherlock goes wide-eyed and arch.

“Look. You said, ‘Nothing of consequence,’ but it’s obviously something. Did you figure out something about Jim, something to get him to leave you alone finally?”
“No,” Sherlock says, truthfully, “it was nothing to do with stopping Jim.”

As so often around Sherlock, John can see he’s missing something — Sherlock would say “everything of importance.” Twenty Questions it is, then. “Is it about those packages you mentioned?”

Sherlock looks haughty, as though nothing could be less worthy of his attention. “Jim executed in modeling clay, not skillfully, three dioramas I suppose one might call them, in which a figure representing me was engaged in sadomasochistic sexual activity with figures representing Lestrade, Donovan, and Anderson. They were at the Yard, addressed to the obvious parties.” At John’s look of dismay: “Oh, don’t worry, Lestrade saw the one depicting himself and had the wit to appropriate the other two before his colleagues appeared. So!” Handclap, bright false hateful smile. “That’s all right, then.”

The more words, the more dissembling: the First Axiom of Sherlock Holmes. “What happened to them, though?”

“Oh, I binned them of course. About that curry — ”

*

A difficulty of being Sherlock’s friend — of being near enough to recognize his architecture of moat and drawbridge, and to know something of what exigencies inspired it — is that there are times when John, being human, is tempted (eliding several hundred years’ worth of military metaphor) simply to parachute into the castle keep. Instead he stands outside, offering himself and living on the moments when the inhabitant steps out from behind the ramparts. Just now, though, Sherlock has closed up tight, with a corny pointing-finger sign to urge visitors to check out the Sans-Souci just next door. The Sans-Souci looks just like the real thing — honest, it does. “I do know when I’m being fobbed off,” John tells him, which gets back a surprise: Sherlock’s smile, fugitive and real — and a concession: “I suppose you do.” But he still won’t tell John what he was thinking earlier.

They eat their curry and samosas; any outside observer of supper at 221B who was not Sherlock’s intellectual double would believe nothing was wrong.

John makes his tired way home much later, wishing he could protect Sherlock, wishing there were something here for medicine or guns to do.

*

John was right, of course: Sherlock has learned something of consequence — namely, that his hypothesis is correct and that John remains himself whether bringing over takeaway or stitching a laceration on Sherlock’s arm or —

Sherlock has precisely memorized John’s (stumbling; mesmerizing) account of — of doing what Jim did to Sherlock — but that’s not right; it’s not the same at all. Its superficial topography matches, that’s all. In French one may speak of faux amis, or, in English, of false friends. A Fagott is a German bassoon. A Frenchwoman who finds herself embarrassée may, perhaps, blush, but an Englishwoman who is merely embarrassed need not consider whether to have an abortion. When Jim bound Sherlock’s penis, the act meant something entirely unlike what the same motor patterns would signify as enacted by John. John’s tone, when he spoke of those motor patterns, encompassed … Sherlock can barely think the words. They are gratitude tenderness desire. What might it feel like, to be the one who elicited that tone. John was speaking from experience; he has done this to — no, with — someone, more than one someone in his lifetime possibly probably almost certainly, but none of those people were Sherlock, and oh they should have been, Sherlock would be so good, he would be
obedient, he would clasp his hands behind his back and offer up his penis and his testicles, John’s hands would be firm and careful, he would cup Sherlock’s cheek (the way he did that night after Guildford) and bite at Sherlock’s lips, noises would emerge from Sherlock’s mouth as John fucked it with his fingers, oh lovely, look at you, so hot for me love, Sherlock’s nipples would already be sore, John rubbing and pinching them, you like that, don’t you, like me hurting you, just like this, so good for me, I’m going to hurt you till you cry and come and you can’t tell which is which, teasing at the slit of Sherlock’s penis, maybe John would allow Sherlock to suckle at John’s penis, would bend Sherlock over where Sherlock knelt and caress his testicles, order Sherlock to hold himself open, so humiliating to present himself for inspection, yes let me see how much you want it you gorgeous thing, for handling, dirty and — and —

Jim says Oh you little slut, not too clever to be gagging for it, are you?

Sherlock takes his hand off his cock, draws in a loud breath, rolls onto his side with his arms wrapped around himself. What does it matter that he trusts John, what does it matter that the thought of John laying hands and mouth on him and — and — marking him makes Sherlock’s heart race in his throat, makes his lips part, makes him want to drop to his knees — what does any of that matter if everything, always, comes round to Jim? He drags himself up and into the shower, aching with the wish to be in actuality what it has been so convenient to call himself, someone who could kill Jim (and not mind doing it) (and be done with it). Not a sociopath: another defeat.

* 

Even before Jim reappeared, Sherlock was well aware of the trap presented by stalkers in general, to wit that they are the closest thing to perpetual motion machines, which any input at all — a police warning; the mention of their target in a newspaper; the sight of an advert for the target’s preferred dentifrice — will fuel. Bribe, blandishment, threats; protective orders; lawsuits and violence — no matter what response the target offers, the stalker is thereby incited, even encouraged. As for Jim, specifically: since he wishes only to destroy Sherlock, there is nothing to bargain with. That much, Sherlock has understood from the outset. The morning after his conversation with John, however, it comes to him with a shock that he has missed the corollary: having nothing to bargain with, he also has nothing to lose. Jim means to keep taking his small sharp blade to Sherlock’s life for weeks, months, years of exactly judged tortures. The situation has already become intolerable, so there is no reason to avoid the end. He’ll find Jim and face him, and what he’ll do then he has no idea in the world, but there must be something. There has always been something.

He types Jim’s name into Google.

The hits, expectably, comprise a thicket of James Moriartys — a middling fashion photographer, a quite competent physicist in New South Wales, an Irish bishop, a lawyer who defends American dentists against malpractice claims, an estate agent in Stoke on Trent. LinkedIn, LinkedIn, LinkedIn: why don’t they just change the site’s name to No Exit and have done? James Moriarty even teaches maths in Lincolnshire, but he isn’t Jim. Jim only turns up sixteen pages into the search results, in a digitized copy of one number of a parish newsletter from the early 1980s, preserved apparently because the rich inhabitant of the deconsecrated church that once served the parishioners has devoted a website to his “fabulously eccentric digs,” and wishes to supply his (quite numerable, Sherlock is certain) fans with a few bonnes bouches of history. Thus the digitized newsletter, which features a copy of an 1847 engraving of the church under construction. Jim’s photo appears on the newsletter’s back page, next to a sentence extolling his achievement of first-class honors with his undergraduate degree. The portrait must have been poor to begin with and the digitization has done it no favors: Jim’s expression is impossible to read. It might even reflect ordinary pride, or happiness. He is younger than when Sherlock met him, of course.
Sherlock logs in to 192.com. If Jim is on the electoral rolls in London or any other jurisdiction, he has opted out of the public listings. (Sherlock has never registered to vote. There was some resulting fuss about a fine, once. If Sherlock does not vote, how likely is it that Jim would be so civic minded?) There is no telephone number under Jim’s name. Obviously he is alive — Sherlock has a sudden wild vision of Jim faking his death, so he checks anyway; but no, no James Moriarty of anything like the correct age has died, or “died,” in London or any other jurisdiction in the past two decades — nor, unsurprisingly, has he married. It’s not inconceivable that he has taken on the identity of some dead infant from the latter part of the mid-twentieth century, but not even Sherlock’s powers of deduction are equal to the task of looking at the names of hundreds or thousands of dead male infants and working out which one of them might have been resurrected in the form of Jim.

Jim’s birth record is there: Fulham, August 23, 1965. Sherlock already knew when and where Jim was born, and denies to himself that it is any relief to see the listing, to find incontrovertibly that Jim has flesh and bone and grew from sperm and egg like any other — “criminal,” the John Watson in Sherlock’s brain supplies.

Apart from that birth record, the public parts of the Internet appear devoid of Jim or James Moriarty. Devoid of “maths-at-ucl” or any variation Sherlock can think of. There is nothing in any official database within Sherlock’s nontrivial ability to hack. Jim has no police record.

In short, he has made himself invisible.

But whatever you’re looking for is always in the last place you look. Smoking the morning’s eighth cigarette, and almost on a whim, Sherlock tries a search on “Jim Moriarty” plus the address of the familiar bedsit where Sherlock spent so much time. (“Or just ’spent so much,’ darling,” Jim whispers in his ear.) The search brings back one hit. One hit. The link goes to a website consisting of a single page, with a gif of smiling Jim crooking his forefinger over and over at the viewer; below the gif a caption blinks: Hello, sexy. Come and see me.

At the right of the screen, the hit counter ticks over from 0000 to 0001.

The gif disappears. In its place, a banner, text all caps, Lucida Sans: TIME’S UP. After three seconds, the screen goes dark.
This bullet covered with your name

Chapter Summary

It seems absurd to Sherlock now that he thought it better to let Jim choose the time. Never mind. There is no point in regrets when the teeth are closing around him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes explicit descriptions of the sexual abuse of an adolescent boy (not Sherlock this time).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It seems absurd to Sherlock now that he thought it better to let Jim choose the time. Never mind. There is no point in regrets when the teeth are closing around him.

*

Islington has climbed the money ladder since Sherlock was last here and Jim sponged off Mycroft for their meals, and the lock on the front door of the Duncan Street apartment block is, in keeping, much better as well. Fortunately, Sherlock’s skills have likewise advanced from the days when it was as much as he could do to break into a hospice medication cupboard. The corridor has been spruced up, and then some — the floor stripped down to the boards and refinished, the walls a frankly beautiful lavender-gray, the staircase trim gleaming unbruised. The once-filthy skylight glows with the cloud-bright day. Climbing the stairs is like climbing the stairs twenty years ago, though: the steps turn exactly where they used to, the stories are the same height as they used to be; the dread is the same, and, underneath the dread, the sensation of being carried by something that isn’t himself.

Sherlock knocks on Jim’s door but there is no answer — which makes no sense, for isn’t Jim expecting him? Could Sherlock possibly have mistaken — ?

No, this is the correct flat, first floor rear.

The lock is an easy one and not fifteen seconds have passed when the door opens to Sherlock’s picks.

This is not Jim’s flat.

Sherlock’s head goes light for an instant before he registers that it was Jim’s flat. The shape of the room; the kitchen fixtures — new ones, but ranged, as the old fixtures were, along the far wall; the three big windows to the right: Sherlock knows this geography as intimately as that of Baker Street. The near door on the left wall opens on a cupboard; the middle door is the bath; the far door leads to the tiny bedroom.
But copies of the *BMJ* and *Clinical Endocrinology* litter the coffee table, along with a catalogue from Boden and the latest *Elle*. And on the yellow sofa under those three windows is a marmalade cat, blinking. It is easier to imagine that Jim has somehow transmogrified himself into a thirtyish endocrinologist and undergone gender reassignment than it is to imagine him with a pet cat. Hardest of all is to imagine any place of Jim’s so devoid of malignity, so boringly, tediously, banally pleasant. Sherlock almost sways under the force of the longing simply to remain.

He steps into the building corridor, shuts the flat door quietly, makes certain that it has latched behind him, descends the hushed, clean staircase, and walks back through the entry hall and out onto the pavement. He’s been wrong-footed since the beginning. Jim is so good at making himself invisible; now Sherlock wonders whether he was wrong when he told John how unlikely it was that Jim had kept him under surveillance. He thinks of the dozen times, over these past weeks, when he thought he saw Jim in a crowd or heard his voice; what if he was right, what if Jim really has been watching him for — for years?

But no. It’s his own fear that has been wrong-footing him all along, and now it has made him ridiculous too.

*Back at Baker Street, he disables comments on The Science of Deduction and John’s associated blog, to forestall the idiots who will shortly appear; he leaves it till later, though, to take the site down — maybe John would like to save some of his accounts, preposterously overdramatized though they are —

It will be difficult for John, if there is a great deal of publicity. Patients may be reluctant to come to him. Clients will not come to Sherlock. John will miss the cases (*laboriously typing out his blog, breathing through his mouth sometimes and laughing under his breath*); Sherlock is incapable of providing him with the — the *other* things he needs, and John is a catch: sooner or later he’ll get over his absurd attachment to Sherlock. Someone will turn up who isn’t so (*think it*) afraid, someone who doesn’t have “Property of Jim Moriarty” whispering over every synapse. Who isn’t a public laughingstock. It won’t happen straight away, though; there will be an interval —

Mrs. Hudson makes tea almost as well as John does. She is easily scandalized but impossible to shock, and she makes only the most basic use of the Internet. For a long time she and Dr. Banerjee were all Sherlock had, and that was fine, really. Sherlock had been perfectly all right.

Meanwhile several texts have come in from John. In the first five he inquires about Sherlock’s activities and general welfare. In the sixth, he has lost his temper, and therefore also his already limited typing skills:

**JW to SH, 16:42**

*would yo just let me know yr okay, you wanker?*

**SH to JW, 16:45**

*Don’t be an idiot; I’m fine. I’ll see you tomorrow. SH*

Jim may act tonight. If he doesn’t, then the evening alone will be practice for the time that’s coming, Sherlock reminds himself (*sitting with John a few weeks ago in a little Chinese restaurant, John’s shoulders shaking with laughter at some observation Sherlock has made of another customer, the smell of orange beef and sesame noodles, the nonsense-sense of feeling that he, Sherlock, was full of air when of course anyone breathing is always full of air.*…), and hits Send.
But nothing happens. Not that evening, nor the next afternoon. Sherlock hasn’t slept and in the periphery of his thoughts cocaine circles, buzzing and whining, over and over coming into view, darting away and back; years have passed since he wanted to follow that stinging dream so urgently. If he could only think —

“Anything to report?” John asks as he unpacks their takeaway.

What can Sherlock say — that he imagined Jim would still be in his old flat? That he picked the lock, and that the new inhabitant reads fashion magazines, and that the cat on the sofa, in the sunlight, regarded a stranger with interest and entirely without fear? That he, Sherlock Holmes, the world’s only consulting detective, a man with an international reputation, wanted bitterly to enter the life of that flat and never leave it? He can’t say any of that, so he shakes his head. Right, left, right. John frowns but lets it pass.

A day.

Another day. John texts inquiringly, would-be amusingly, inquiringly, nonsensically, would-be amusingly; Sherlock replies Nothing and Still nothing and Stop fussing and John’s texts are like water dripping on his forehead but if John didn’t text then Sherlock would feel sick and terrified.

More sick and terrified.

Sherlock’s next physio is in two days and afterward John will again sit on the couch eating takeaway and frowning worriedly at Sherlock and trying to get him to eat and Sherlock will try not to snap at him because even though this will not be the last time John sits on the couch at 221B there is surely a finite number of such evenings in Sherlock’s future so he must not squander any of them by driving John away and stupid no matter what, there would always have been a finite number of such evenings, even if the limit had been set by the extent of time during which both John and Sherlock were alive the number of evenings would still have been finite, so why does it matter so much, why —

There are no private cases still in train from before Sherlock closed comments on the blogs. There are no cases from Lestrade. Not one of the hateful slow idiotic forensics journals has issued a new number. Sherlock goes to Barts and criticizes Molly Hooper’s autopsy technique until she shouts at him. In the middle of the explosion she registers the purple skin under his eyes and the fact that he has been standing with his arms wrapped around himself since he arrived, so she breaks off and makes up a few slides of recent liver sections: one from a healthy ninety-six-year-old who was struck by a car while out jogging, one from a middle-aged recluse who didn’t visit a doctor when he started having strange abdominal symptoms and who consequently died, alone, of hemochromatosis, then ripened in his flat till someone noticed the smell, and one from a woman who died of benzodiazepine overdose when her date overenthusiastically spiked her drink with Rohypnol. “He has an excellent defense available against a murder charge,” Sherlock remarks. “‘I only have sex with living women who would refuse my attentions if they were awake to do so, do you take me for a necrophile,’ et cetera. Well, that should go over well with the jury, don’t you think?”

“Go home, Sherlock.”

A third day. At 16:42, while Sherlock is making a hash of the passacaglia from Biber’s Rosary
Sonatas, Lestrade texts: Can you come in? Teenager kidnapped. Need you to look at some photos of the victim.

And, a minute later: Please. Even if it’s boring. As a personal favor.

*

All Jim’s pranks — and this kidnapping, which must be Jim’s, will, from Jim’s point of view, be just that: a prank — arrange themselves into a game of peek-a-boo, or its barely less childish cousin hide-and-seek. Curious that Sherlock has never seen it in just this light before. He sets the thought aside to consider later, whatever later turns out to be. Now the next hours lay themselves out as in so many slides. Jim must be proposing a bargain of sorts: Lead the police to me, and I’ll make sure they and the rest of the world know all about you. Don’t lead the police to me, and I leave everybody in the dark. For a while, at least; betcha can’t wait to see what I come up with next time … Well. That’s that, then. John will see the dénouement soon enough; he may as well come along. Their last case (Jim says, “Awwwww”). Besides, if the kidnap victim is as Sherlock expects him to be, John can talk to him. Sherlock would find the wrong things to say, and anyway he’ll be … busy.

*

JW to SH, 16:50:

i can be at nsy in 20 min.

*

There are three photos of the naked boy, sent to the Yard via an anonymous remailer based in the eastern Ukraine. The name of the boy is Callum Wolfe. He is in mid adolescence. He isn’t a pretty or bright-looking child, and he’s doughy from too much time spent playing — what is it? World of Warcraft, his mother says. She is sitting in Lestrade’s office, twisting her face and trying not to cry. Sally Donovan’s hand is on her shoulder. The others present glance at her from time to time and then glance away, embarrassed.

In the first photo — their sender has thoughtfully numbered them, to clarify their status as a series — Callum Wolfe kneels, spotty rump in the air. Lubricant glistens on the inner surfaces of his buttocks. In the second he holds his own penis, which is limp. His face is contorted and wet with tears. In the third, he kneels again, still or again crying, and around his neck is a placard, and the placard reads: NOT NEARLY AS FUCKABLE AS YOU.

Rather a lot of words for a sign hung on someone’s chest, but then Jim has already made it clear that he likes the (metaphorical or real) sound of his own voice these days as much as he liked it two decades ago. The boy’s anus is not visible in any of the photographs so it is not possible to know whether the words on the placard represent an a priori judgment or a conclusion based on empirical evidence.

Sherlock becomes aware that he has said nothing for far too long. Lestrade, Donovan, and Anderson are staring at him. John, who is seated immediately to Sherlock’s left, is instead staring at the surface of Lestrade’s desk. He has seen enough of the photographs, Sherlock supposes; well, so has Sherlock. He forces his attention away from the miserable weeping boy and to the other elements of each image.

All the photos were taken with Callum in the same spot in the same room. What appears to be natural daylight is coming in from his left when he faces the photographer, from his right in the photograph
of his bare bum, but without a reliable timestamp there is no way to know the direction of the exposure. In any event, “The windows face east/west/north/south” is not much of a clue — and, besides, the real clues in each photograph announce themselves.

In the first photo: a poster of a Caucasian woman with straight dark hair, full lips, and arched brows; she wears a black veil and what appears to be an embossed leather jacket; her beringed hands are spread over her bosom. Also: an envelope bearing an address in Vincent, Iowa, USA. Also: a helium balloon.

In the second photo: a book jacket visible in the corner of the room. Lurid yellow background, black silhouette of head and shoulders, author’s surname just legible from the angle at which the photo was shot: Ellis. On the wall, a photograph of a fish, which Sherlock recognizes as a gray mullet.

In the third photograph: a strip of paper on the wall above Callum, and on it the words “On my bed I remember you.”

The obvious thing to do is to solve the rebuses, work out where Callum is, say nothing, and bolt. Get there first and undo the trap Jim will have laid. But Callum’s face is contorted with weeping and it doesn’t need a consulting detective to deduce the infinitely many cries of Hey pudge and Oi, you fat poof heard at school — sentiment — and the boy’s throat will be clogged with weeping — sentiment — and Sherlock does not bolt but instead sits in Lestrade’s office considering. Strangely, under the dread he isn’t particularly intrigued by Jim’s puzzle, but weary, and not just because he has slept little in the past few days. What is the source of this feeling? It’s not entirely unfamiliar … Yes. A night in a chemistry lab; slipping in late, illicitly, to work on his research; finding that others had arrived before him; the sensation not only of fear but of sheer tedium at the thought that his days of being ambushed by his classmates were not yet behind him. He had been wrong then — the trap he entered came later and was of his own making — but now here it really is again, that juvenile malevolence he once knew so well. Was Jim always such a child? All this elaborate cleverness in the service of … nothing of the remotest worth to anyone. Sherlock blinks at the realization: Jim is a bore.

Some elements of the puzzle sort themselves out quickly enough. The images Jim has chosen represent numbers. The US postcode for Vincent, Iowa, is 50594. The atomic number of helium is 2. A mullet is not only a fish but also a hairstyle, hideous and much mocked — known, for example, as a 1090, to suggest that 10 percent of the wearer’s hair is on top of his head, and 90 percent behind him.

A bigger screen is needed for an image search. “Give me your laptop,” Sherlock tells Lestrade, and types in “book,” “jacket,” “Ellis.” Yes, there are several books by someone named Bret Easton Ellis, with similarly garish cover graphics. Sherlock pauses over American Psycho, but no, there will be something numerical; he scrolls down further — yes. Less Than Zero. “Minus zed, one zed nine zed … it’s latitude and longitude, he’s giving me the location of a building” — there’s a huff from Anderson at that “me,” but for whom does Anderson imagine these clues are being left, if not for Sherlock? — “and the latitude will be signified by that woman’s name.”


“Latitude fifty-one, then, point five zed five nine four two.”

John says, very quietly: “Six and three are the last two figures in the longitude.”

Everyone in the room stares at him.

Still not looking up from the desk, John continues: “It’s a line from the Sixty-third Psalm. ‘On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.’ ‘You’ meaning God, of
course. My parents did a lot of psalm-reading, so.” He shrugs.

Latitude 51.505942

Longitude -0.109063

The coordinates pertain to several terraced houses in Aquinas Street, south of the Thames and just east of the King’s College Waterloo campus. There’s a hurried phone conversation between Donovan and a friend of hers, an estate agent: one of the relevant houses is vacant. They go.

*  

As it transpires, Sherlock does arrive two and a half minutes ahead of the Met, thanks to a delivery van cornering too fast with an ill-distributed load; it skids and pitches over onto its passenger side directly in front of Lestrade’s car and no more than half a dozen streets from their destination.

Sherlock scrambles past the cursing van driver. Sally Donovan, Philip Anderson, and half a dozen PCs plus the youthful-victim specialist, Panjabi, are just getting out of the cars behind Lestrade’s. The ambulance for the boy is pulled up third.

Sherlock has a head start and he knows a shortcut, but his speed isn’t what it once was. John catches him up and buys back a few moments by kicking the house door in.

No one and nothing on the ground floor, no one and nothing on the first; the empty house rings and echoes around them; halfway up the stairs between the second and third floors, Sherlock’s left leg sails out from under him; he catches himself on the banister and hauls himself up, up, up.

Callum Wolfe is on the third floor. The strip of paper quoting Psalm 63 is still on the wall behind him. He is handcuffed, collared, and attached by a chain leash to an eyebolt in the middle of the floor. He’s as naked as he was in the photos at the Met — *Jesus*, John thinks, *he must be freezing*, for the day was a cool one and dusk has gathered — but Sherlock has already hauled out of the Belstaff and thrust it at John without a glance in his direction or Callum’s. “You’re safe,” John says, draping the coat over the child, undoing the straps of the gag in his mouth, “the police are right behind us, you’re safe.”

“All right,” Callum says — he’s so hoarse with tears that John can barely hear him, “he — he —”

John has unclipped the leash but the collar is padlocked on, he can’t do anything about the handcuffs, and the child is sobbing with his face buried in John’s donkey jacket. “Shhh, shhh,” he says, “your mum’s going to be so glad we’ve found you, the police’ll get you out of those cuffs in a minute,” *Christ, I hope so, they look like police issue*, but Sherlock swoops down and swiftly in silence picks the cuffs and the padlock and then straightens his back and composes his face and stands away.

John helps Callum to his feet, wraps the beautiful coat around him. The wool smells smoky; he’s got to get after Sherlock again to quit. “Your mum says you love to play video games, Callum, that right?”

A hiccup. “Yeah.”

“What’s your favorite, then?” Feet are pounding up the stairs now. *Oh God, please.*

Then Donovan is there, Panjabi right behind her. “Here,” John says, “here, Sherlock got him out of the collar and cuffs straightaway,” and Panjabi is already bent to speak with Callum, he takes the hand she holds out to him, and John steps away and looks for Sherlock, they can get his coat back.
later —

But Sherlock is gone.

*

Wrong *again*. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong again. Sherlock knew, he *knew*, that the flat would be booby-trapped, perhaps a motion detector that would trigger a relay that signaled a laptop to send photo files everywhere. Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock and more Sherlock: to the *Star* the *Sun* the *Mirror* the *Mail* the *Independent* the *Scotsman*. *Sheffield Today*, no doubt. The BBC and Sky News and ITV and Al Jazeera. Websites catering for men sensible of the attractions of youth. And, of course, every email account associated with the Met.

But this has not happened. Five minutes was enough to make that clear. The flat held no booby trap. No wires, no motion detectors, no tiny state-of-the-art CCTV cameras, not a single electronic device. Just a space devoid of everything but a naked adolescent boy and the last clue that led to him. Which suggests that now the game will loop, a real-life gif in which Jim invites Sherlock to solve a puzzle over and over and over again, and each time Sherlock solves the puzzle he will do so expecting that *this* will be the final loop, *this* will be the time he walks into the booby trap because he is weak, weak, weak, he can never quite eradicate sentiment, he could not bring himself to extend the boy’s captivity by even half an hour in order to buy himself time to undo a trap, and the same thing will happen next time, and next time, and next time, until there are no next times. …

Sherlock’s cab is just turning onto the Marylebone Road, nearly at Baker Street, when something new occurs to him. Yes. Jim has made a mistake: he left a clue on his website, and Sherlock saw it but didn’t recognize its significance. Now he does.

His heart pounds in his throat. The air smells like hunting. He cannot hear the cabdriver recite the fare. *Exaltation.*

He can find Jim. Deal with Jim. Leave no clues of his own.

He can make this loop the last one. It will be easy.

He told John, a week or a century ago, that he wasn’t that kind of sociopath. But, Sherlock thinks, thrusting twenties in the driver’s general direction, maybe he was wrong.

*

JW to SH, 19:50

*greg got forensics to release the coat minus a few thread samples. i can bring it by later.*

JW to SH: 19:51

*or tomorrow. bit good how you picked the locks, mate.*

JW to SH, 20:15

*let me know if you’re ok. i get it that you want to be by yourself, just — you know. that was good. no, it was amazing. all of it. brilliant.*

*

Amazing. Brilliant. Under normal circumstances John is quite at ease with this contrast between
himself and Sherlock — that he stumbles over words, struggles to speak his heart in adjective and cliché, whereas Sherlock’s speech is waltz and tango and balletic leap — but, texting from his Sherlock-less flat with the Belstaff in a carrier bag, he despair. He could say so much more than this with a cup of tea and a plate of curry; he could say so much more, if he could press Sherlock’s head against his shoulder. *Words.*

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

Also words.

*

And now to Jim’s clue. As a precaution, Sherlock saved the page to the Wayback Machine (and why hadn’t Jim thought to exclude web crawlers? So, two mistakes), but somewhat to his surprise the site has not been taken down. Sherlock downloads the gif, splits it into individual frames, and clicks through each until he finds what he was looking for. Jim, sitting in an armchair, takes up almost the entire image, but it is possible to see the wall to his left. And on the wall is a mirror. And the mirror reflects the view from a window on the opposite wall. And London belongs to Sherlock; London is Sherlock’s sister, his mother, his soul. He knows her every aspect. He recognizes the stretch of the Thames’ north bank visible in Jim’s mirror. The work of calculating how high the window must be scarcely qualifies as mathematics. From there he has only to identify the sufficiently tall south bank blocks that face this particular stretch of the river.

Twenty-four years ago, when he brought down Jim’s academic career, what had Sherlock felt? He was strung tight, he remembers how cold his hands were in the advisor’s office as he printed out the faked thesis. His heart was racing then too. When Sherlock was fifteen he was prey still. But this time, when Sherlock turns on his hunter, he will not be prey. And then. And then.

First, however, he must put John off. John has been texting anxiously; if he gets nothing back, he will set aside his scruples about Sherlock’s privacy and appear at Baker Street. That will not do.

*SH to JW, 20:45*

*No need to worry. Best left to my own devices tonight. Thank you for retrieving the coat. SH*

John won’t like it, but he’s careful never to press against Sherlock’s decisions.

*

One must always dress for an occasion: in this case, the correct attire conveys an impression of reliability and uprightness while simultaneously making no impression at all. A cap with a brim — to Sherlock’s advantage, this early June night is exceptionally cool, so there’s nothing remarkable about his wearing it. Jeans, a plain buttoned shirt, a blazer; nothing that fits so well as to invite requests for the name of one’s tailor. Moderately fashionable trainers. No striking colors. Plenty of pockets: for lockpicks, for zip ties, for nitrile gloves. As for an — an instrument, he’ll improvise with what he finds when he gets there. It will be safest to use something that has never belonged to him.

Bakerloo line to Victoria. Then a walk to Gloucester Road, where Sherlock takes the District Line, alighting at Tower Hill. He crosses the Thames at London Bridge and turns east. A few streets away are the three warehouse conversions that could give onto the view reflected in Jim’s mirror. This is where things get tricky, as he has no way to know whether the correct block is the first of the three or the last. Three minutes at three service doors picking three sets of locks means, probably, at least
three cameras he must avoid. And he will have to take the stairs carefully: at every dozenth step or so, his left foot drags.

As it happens, a look at the first of his possibilities tells him he’s hit lucky. The view in Jim’s mirror must be from four stories up, three if the building in question has exceptionally high ceilings. This is such a building: the span between one set of windows and those the next floor up means the ceilings rise a good sixteen feet. Such lofty spaces will make visitors feel small, a sensation some people seem to find soothing in churches but that in a social context is generally experienced as unpleasant. Jim would be quite at home with the effect. Sherlock doesn’t believe in intuitions — always, always, one is responding to input from the senses, or to a chain of reasoning so rapid it appears in conscious awareness only when a conclusion has been reached. This is it.

But. The camera overlooking the front door has been disabled. Good news, bad news: it beggars belief that in a pricey conversion like this, the breakdown wouldn’t have been repaired the instant one of the tenants or staff reported it. Therefore … therefore someone is making sure the camera stays broken. Therefore that person expects the arrival of someone who will not want to be seen, and that person is cooperating with the visitor’s wish. That person must be Jim. Which means Jim is expecting him — if not at this moment exactly, then soon. Which means that the mirror in the gif was not a mistake. Which means that Sherlock has been led here.

Has been played, again.

There is nowhere to go but forward. He puts on the nitrile gloves.

The name listed for the third-floor flat is Moran. Sherlock frowns — the mystery of Jim’s invisibility solved, then? — and presses the bell. At once, soundlessly, the sliding doors part before him.

The elevator is invitingly open, so Sherlock takes the stairs, moving deliberately, using the banister to save his leg. The stairwell is empty and so are the corridors. There is just one immense flat per story: the hedge-fund managers and Russian billionaires who buy up these conversions must like their habitations to echo around them. The hedge-fund managers, the Russian billionaires, and Jim. Sherlock breathes. In, out.

At the door of the flat, Sherlock stops to listen again. Nothing is audible and no light shows along the jamb. He composes himself and tries the door. It is, of course, unlocked.

What must be every lamp in the place flashes on.


Chapter End Notes

The poster of Lykke Li that provides the clue LI (= Roman numeral 51, hence latitude 51) was, at the time of writing, her YouTube profile photo.

Scroll down this page to see what must be the ur-1090 mullet, on a frighteningly
youthful Van Damme.

How Sherlock examines the gif frame by frame.

How to slow down a gif. Everybody but me probably already knew how to do these things, right? I had to look it up.
More desperate maybe, or just a thing that's brave

Chapter Summary

Sherlock can spend the rest of his life as Jim’s creature — as only what Jim made of him. Or he can finish this.

Chapter Notes

… the meadow at last
fills with light, like a bowl,
filled with light, spilling with it, only harder now,
as if more desperate maybe, or just a thing that’s brave.

— Carl Phillips, “First You Must Cover Your Face”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mint flavors the air: Jim is chewing gum. Apart from the large and vigorous movements of his jaw, he is sitting still; only the muzzle of his gun follows Sherlock to the chair facing him. Perhaps ten feet separate them.

The mirror is absent.

The gif made Jim appear to have aged well, only with his hairline somewhat receded. But in person he looks as if his skin had been set aside in favor of high-quality latex. Sherlock can identify no sign that this is the result of plastic surgery, nor does Jim appear ill; so the face is another pointless mystery. Jim's eyes move quickly, brightly, as they always did. Always that amused gaze of the one who knows what's going to happen next.

On the chair Jim has designated as Sherlock’s is a sheaf of photographs. Sherlock inspects them. Each is familiar to him and he remembers the circumstances of its making. The boy Callum, weeping as he held his poor unwilling penis, was a subject of sympathy and outrage; here is Sherlock in the same pose, fully erect, slick with his own pre-ejaculate, biting his lip not to stop his weeping but because he is transported by lust.

Sherlock on his knees, looking over his left shoulder as he parts his buttocks; semen and lubricant drip from his dilated anus.

Sherlock’s penis bound with cord: the uncropped version of the photograph sent to John at the clinic. In this version Sherlock clasps his hands behind his neck and drools around the four fingers shoving into his mouth.

These photographs and a dozen more, each one illustrative of Sherlock’s weakness and stupidity. He had been passing his afternoons with Jim for months by then; he knew what this was, this — relation
between them — and yet he returned. The camera appeared, and Sherlock returned, and the camera appeared again, and again, and Sherlock posed willingly. Loathing rises in his throat. *Idiot,* he tells his dead self. Here is the evidence of what he really is. “Clever,” no, not so clever. Not clever at all. He forces himself to look up. “How long have you been using the name Moran?” His voice breaks on the first word, but he reminds himself that this doesn’t matter.

“Years and years and years. Jim Moriarty’s career was at a sad end thanks to you, gorgeous, so what was I to do?” Jim shrugs, smiles, pops his gum. The gun never budges. “Sebastian Moran has had a long and profitable run, but he’s over. Now, what do you suppose happens next?”

“Those impersonators you sent round to Baker Street — “

“You’re even dimmer than you used to be, pretty boy. Dimmer and, now that I think about it, not so pretty. Fourteen was a good look on you. *Anyway,* they had a few emails from somebody named Jim, and then some money magically appeared in their bank accounts. The salon got a photo of some eyebrows to work from. That’s it! Don’t worry, there’s nothing to connect them to Sebastian.”

Sherlock starts.

“See, I knew that’s why you stopped by! And you put the gloves on before you rang the bell downstairs, didn’t you? Good boy. Maybe you’re not quite *that* dim. What were you thinking of as a weapon?”

“You might,” Sherlock points out, “be recording this.”

Singsong: “I mi-i-ight be, but I’m no-o-ot. That would disrupt the beautiful symmetry of the choice I’m about to offer you. Ready?”

Sherlock says nothing.

“Oh, all right. You think, because I’ve got this gun, which you might like to know I procured just for you, sexy — anyway, you think, because I’ve got this gun, that I’m planning to shoot you. No indeed. In fact — ” And the gun sails over the space between them.

Sherlock catches it reflexively.

“You,” Jim says, pulling a notebook computer from between his leg and the arm of his chair, “are going to kill me. You’re going to kill me dead, dead, dead. And you’re going to get away with it.”

“Well soundproofed, then, this place?” Sherlock prefers to be ready for even unlikely eventualities; although he has handled a gun perhaps thrice in his life, and that includes the episode at Guildford, YouTube is rich in tutorials in more than the decorative folding of serviettes. He has availed himself of these. It is not difficult to translate them into practical movement: he makes sure the safety is on and finds four bullets in the chamber.

“It is! *Super* well! But you know what’s even better? There’s nobody home, upstairs or down. So the soundproofing is beside the point!”

The nitrile gloves provide a good, slightly tacky grip. Sherlock’s heart is everywhere all at once, every beat an explosion; he seems to be pulsating. Each separate molecule of air registers itself against his skin. *Nonsense.* He raises the gun. *Do it.*

Jim keeps talking as though nothing has happened. “You did take a circuitous route here, I hope?”

Sherlock nods.
“Excellent. Now let’s talk about why you’re going to kill me.”

“I shouldn’t have thought the question needed answering.” This is exaltation. It must be. An answered prayer, if he believed in prayers, if he believed in answers.

“Indulge me.”

Sherlock tilts his head. He crosses his left arm in front of himself and rests his gun hand against his left wrist. The barrel points at Jim.

“You’re going to kill me, and you’re going to do so in the next ten minutes, because, if you don’t, I’m going to hit Enter on my touchpad and all those artistic photographs I took of you — ”

“Don’t bore me with what I already know.”

“People might sympathize with you if you were like that little wretch I left for you to find in Aquinas Street. Mewling and begging — well, you begged too, of course, but he begged me to stop. Do you remember that, how you begged? ‘Please, please,’ with your voice that had just broken. You could never get your pants down fast enough.”

Walking from the Tube to Jim’s flat, climbing the stairs, heavyfooted, the pit of his belly sick and tense, turn around, turn around. The flat door opens, he steps in, it slams behind him. He presses himself against it, already throwing his head back, palms flat against the wood, Jim opening his flies and palming him there, and yes he did say please, he did, he dropped to his knees with his trousers pushed down below his arse and put his hands behind his back —

The barrel of the gun has shifted to the right, so if Sherlock fires now he won’t hit center mass. He corrects his aim.

“What would it be like, I wonder, to have your friend the detective inspector look at you knowing how easy it is to get you on your knees? Oh, and that gentleman in forensics, what's his name — Anderson, that's right. He's no fan of yours — it's just amazing what you can pick up from the news if you're really paying attention. Did he and Sergeant Donovan like the present I sent them?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“Oh … your pet DI got to them first. Well, too bad, in life there's always a certain amount of throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks. The pictures are all going to stick, darling. Direct to everybody's email, no delay, no chance for any intervention. Eight minutes.”

“Is that all you can come up with? Some people who are not my friends will continue in that capacity.” Sherlock makes his prissiest face.

At a shout: “Don't bullshit me, you slut. You came here with every intention of killing me, remember?”

It occurs to Sherlock that, in imagining the worst possible outcome of Jim's games, he had somehow preserved the hope of averting it.

“And your little blogger friend,” Jim continues — now smiling again, for Sherlock has blinked at the mention of John. “Are you desperately in love with him? He'll be disgusted, though — oh. Oh, no, I've got it backwards, don't I. He's super kink-ee, but he's romantic about it. He's sweet on you. He thinks I did you wrong. He thinks it would be different with him. Mm, and you were thinking the same, weren't you? News flash, sexy: John’s wro-ong. He thinks you just want to play at being filthy, but you’re not playing. Hearts and flowers with your leather? Please. You wouldn’t even be
able to get off, would you? You’d have to think about me. Six and a half minutes. And sooner or later the current passes through even the feeblest filament of a brain. He’ll figure you out and say his farewells.” Jim’s hand opens and closes in an infant’s bye-bye.

“Or — you know what I have a feeling might be worst of all?”

Sherlock says nothing.

“It’s not the Metropolitan Police finding out what you are and who you belong to. It’s not the newspapers or B Sky B, and it’s not those delightful corners of the Darknet where boy-lovers like to while away the tedious hours. It’s not even that hopeless quasi boyfriend of yours. Nope! It’s brother Mycroft.”

Sherlock keeps his breathing even, doesn’t blink. His worst tell, and he’s already given it once.

“You haven’t seen him in years, have you? Not since he gave you up in favor of me. He was like the Blogging Doctor: a romantic. He sold you to me because he just loved me that much. He’d have given me anything, and he did. He gave me his baby brother. Aww.

“Not that it would’ve been any use his trying to protect you from me, considering that I was giving you exactly what you wanted. Considering that ‘wanted’ doesn’t even cover it. Did he ever find out what you got up to? Not from you, I’m guessing, and definitely not from me. He’s going to find out now, though. In detail. Well, I don’t know — maybe you’d like that. Would you? Bit of exhibitionism? Maybe you want brother Mycroft and the rest of the world to get a good look at your slutty little self. Four minutes.”

“I think,” Sherlock says, as if having heard none of this, “that I’ve understood your reasons for — let’s call it occupying yourself with me. But you can publish the photos without incriminating yourself. It’s true, once they’re out I’ve no incentive to protect you. On the other hand, it took me a little trouble to find you, and you’d left me a clue. The Yard couldn’t have managed it. Why not finish me off and go on to the next thing? The next boy, the next girl, the next family of refugees?”

Jim raises an eyebrow.

“It was you, then,” Sherlock says. “I admit I thought at first you’d just happened to spot a case for which I was likely to be called in, but the traffic in refugees is a good business for an anonymous man. And you couldn’t rely on the Yard getting a stumper unless you set it up yourself. Did you pick that group because you had reason to think one of them was clever enough to leave me something to work with?”

Jim golf-claps, one two three four. “Two and a half minutes!”

“So why not continue in your brilliant career?”

Jim leans forward and screams into Sherlock’s face: “Because I’m bored, you little moron!”

Sherlock flinches backward into the chair, forces the gun steady. A line of sweat has formed inside his gloves where the joints of his fingers meet his palms. He can hear John, very far away: Yes, I am, actually, homicidally angry, and, absurdly, the next sentence as well: Do you want another cup of tea?

Homicidally angry.

Jim is telling the truth about there being no way to trace back the name Moran — not to the impersonators, not to Jim’s own name, not to Sherlock himself. Jim wants Sherlock to get away
clean. Sherlock is as sure of this as he is that he knows how to purify cocaine. As sure of it as he is of how to tune his violin.

As sure of it as he is that he can conceal this night’s work from John.

“One minute! Make up your stinking, crawling, feeble little mind!”

It will be nothing to misdirect the Metropolitan Police.

“Thirty seconds! What is wrong with you?”

Sarita, in the north Pacific for weeks, will never know that anything has happened except that Jim has gone as mysteriously as he reappeared.

Sherlock can spend the rest of his life as Jim’s creature — as only what Jim made of him. Or he can finish this.

“Now, now, now you little piece of shit do it now!”

Sherlock stands up.

He sets the gun down on the chair. Jim is screaming incomprehensibly. Sherlock doesn’t look at him. He turns toward the door. There is Jim’s screaming, there is the drag of his left leg, there is a sensation of rending everywhere, and then he is at the door and his gloved sweating hand is on the latch and he is turning the latch and stepping out of the door and into the hallway and he closes the door behind him and walks to the top of the staircase and that is as far as his legs will apparently carry him and so he sits down there, on the top step, and leans his head against the stairway wall.

Jim was telling the truth, also, about the soundproofing. Sherlock can only just hear the shot.

Chapter End Notes

To feel anything deranges you. To be seen feeling anything strips you naked. In the grip of it pleasure or pain doesn’t matter. You think what will they do what new power will they acquire if they see me naked like this. If they see you feeling. You have no idea what. It’s not about them. To be seen is the penalty.

— Anne Carson, red doc>
Chapter Summary

Statement of William Sherlock Scott Holmes

Chapter Notes

I will walk down to the end with you
If you will come all the way down with me.

— The Mountain Goats, “Old College Try”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It’s on all the news sites, Mr. Holmes,” Anthea says. “Mr. Holmes —”

*

Statement of William Sherlock Scott Holmes

Yes, I went this evening to the address of James Moriarty, aka Sebastian Moran, with the intention of murdering the inhabitant.

Yes, Moriarty had stalked me for approximately three months prior to this evening.

Yes, we had a prior sexual relationship.

Yes, it is true that the relationship began when I was fourteen and ended when I was fifteen.

No, there was no police report made at the time.

Yes, the photographs emailed by Moriarty just before he shot himself are of me, Sherlock Holmes.

No, I was not aware of Moriarty’s activities or whereabouts in the interval between the end of our — our association in 1991 and the time when his stalking of me began.

Yes, the kidnapping and rape of Callum Wolfe were committed as part of Moriarty’s scheme to harass me and draw me out.

No, I was not aware that Moriarty’s plan would take such a form.

Yes, I was aware that Moriarty intended to widely distribute the photographs of me by electronic means.

No, I did not shoot James Moriarty.

I do not know why.
I do not know.

Sherlock is never really a suspect; the bullet that killed Jim was fired at very close range, but whereas the skin of Jim’s hand bears traces of powder and his prints are on the gun, neither spatter from body fluids nor powder burns are to be found on Sherlock’s person or on his clothing or on the blue nitrile gloves, which he was still wearing when Lestrade’s team arrived. It has been politely requested that he remain in the interview room while his statement is prepared for his signature, and he is jangling and restless and desperate for a cigarette. He isn’t permitted to smoke but he has been provided with coffee not of NSY provenance and his phone has been returned to him, fully charged. It buzzes without cease. He has deleted a hundred and eleven texts from journalists, or persons pretending to be. He registers but deliberately does not consider the implications of the fact that he has no texts from John. He has been given copies of the previous day’s *Guardian*, *Times*, and *Daily Mail* but finds himself unable to absorb their contents.

At two o’clock in the morning he asks to use a toilet and is directed to the nearest one — redundantly, because of course he knows every nook and cranny and storeroom of this building. The PC stationed outside the interview room doesn’t follow him but she is watching in the direction of the loo when he emerges. She blushes and, as he reenters the interview room, gives a brisk nod. Her feet hurt and she is embarrassed by the rumors she has heard about the case. She spends time with a brown dog. She is sleeping poorly, or else coming down with something; probably it’s the former. …

At two thirty Sally Donovan comes in with his statement and sits down.

Sherlock signs it, having pretended to read it through, and is about to inquire in an icy voice whether he is now free to go when she slides a card across the table at him. It’s her business card, but the Metropolitan Police phone number and email address are lined through and her personal address and mobile number are written in. She has used a blue ballpoint pen.

Sherlock’s eyes snap up to hers.

Her expression is neutral.

He studies her face: how has he missed this, in all the years of seeing her at crime scenes, of digging at her choice of lovers, of knowing that, although she is far less stupid than the average officer, she is unlikely ever to attain the rank of detective inspector, because Lestrade’s boss thinks she isn’t deferential enough?

“During your training,” he says. “Someone you were dating, by the statistics.” He hears himself as if at the other end of a long corridor.

“You don’t want to tell me what day of the week?”

Sherlock shrugs. “Weekend evenings are probably the time of greatest risk.”

A smile, not mirthful. “Yeah, they are.”

“This is — in solidarity, then.” He tries to sound lofty, hears himself fail. He didn’t even manage scare quotes.

On a sigh: “You’re a right bastard, aren’t you. Rape or no rape.”

“I wasn’t — ” But he can’t complete the sentence. He looks down at Donovan’s card, blinking. Her 7s are neatly crossed.
“I got drunk,” Donovan continues, “night out with me mates and all. Not so drunk I couldn’t pull myself together to say no, mind you, but I guess he decided my objection was to the color of the loo tile, not his prick at my back end.

“Holmes” — sharply.

Sherlock looks up.

“The worst part was that before it happened I fancied him, a bit. And the feeling didn’t go away right after, even though I felt like shite. It should’ve, right? But it didn’t. So — ”

Sherlock fastens his gaze to the table. He’s going to — He can’t — This hasn’t happened since —

“So, yeah, if you like. In solidarity.”

Please don’t make me look at you. He manages a nod.

“Okay then. Keep the card.” Her chair scrapes back, the door opens. “Oh” — turning the door handle — “you can go any time you’re ready. There’ll be an unmarked car out front right about now.”

*

Sherlock looks at Donovan’s card, or more properly he looks in its direction, for a few minutes longer before he stands up. He pockets the card without letting himself examine his reasons. John still has not texted. He bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood; he straightens his back and steps out into the corridor.

John.

There he is, in a folding chair at the end of the corridor, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, fast asleep. He must have arrived sometime in the past forty-five minutes. Between his feet is an immense carrier bag, and from the top of the carrier bag there protrudes Sherlock’s coat.

Sherlock has never felt anything like this before in his life, not ever. In another moment Jim Moriarty will matter again, the ruin of everything Sherlock has made will matter again, his own public humiliation will matter again, but right now John is at the end of the corridor waiting for him, exhausted and asleep, and this, this is what it feels like to be saved from drowning, this is what joy must be.

“I hope your army superiors never put you on sentry duty,” he says.

John startles and leaps to his feet; his face lights for the duration of a breath before awareness and dismay overtake him. He looks searchingly at Sherlock. “Are you — They brought me in for questioning and I didn’t think of my phone.” (But he had brought Sherlock’s coat.) “This is …”

“Something of a mess, yes.”

John shakes his head, scrubs at his face. He hands Sherlock the bag.

Having delivered the coat, John will go back to his flat. That’s fine. He came to see Sherlock, that’s what matters.

“And I wanted to text you, but then to use somebody else’s phone didn’t … The press. Do you even know what he did? Shit.”
Sherlock holds out his own phone where John can hear it. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

John goes still all over. “Oh, my God. You always knew, didn’t you. What he was planning. Sherlock —”

“Yes, what a wonder and an amazement: Sherlock Holmes deduces something. Thank you for bringing my coat by; I’m sure you’d like to call it a night, so —”

“Hang on, no, it’s — I thought I’d see you home. If, if you’d want that. I mean … it was already mad out there hours ago.”

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Sherlock shakes out the Belstaff and settles it over himself. His legs at least have steadied thanks to the enforced rest of the past few hours. The fact is that he cannot think of anything he wants or of what to do next. He can think as far as leaving Scotland Yard, but the actual physical passage that must come between his opening that door and his getting into the waiting car is beyond his ability to imagine; he’s as blank as a curtain drawn over an empty window. Buzz. Buzz. He might shut off the phone, but the texts and missed calls will only be waiting for him when he turns it back on. Pointless. As Sherlock has no idea whether he wants John to go home, and as John clearly does not want to go home, the desire of the one person present who still has desires may as well be answered, so: “Come along if you’re coming,” Sherlock says.

* 

A hundred microphones and at least that many cameras: thankfully, they are behind two rows of sawhorses that stretch from the glass doors out to the road and the promised car. The flashes go off, and the calls of “Mr. Holmes!” and “Sherlock, any statement?” Every face John can see wears an expression of exaggerated gravity, the look appropriate to hideous crimes involving children, and what does Sherlock perceive there, when even to John it’s obvious that under that expression is another, the real expression, bright and alert, lascivious and eager? — But no, not on every face. Some, mainly at the back, are more reluctant: the ones who don’t like what they’re doing right now but need the job. Too bad for them. John’s sympathies have room only for Sherlock at the moment.

Beside John, the man himself stands quietly, adjusting his scarf just so, drawing on his black gloves. The clamor, the lights. Then one voice, rising above the rest, frames the question in full: “Mr. Holmes, can you shed any light on the portfolio of photographs that appeared in all our In boxes yesterday evening?”

Sherlock finishes smoothing the leather over the backs of his hands and turns toward the speaker. As if choosing from a catalogue of expressions, which of course is exactly what he is doing, he assumes the Look of Polite Indifference. The reporters fall silent.

“I’ve been given to understand,” Sherlock says, pitching his voice to carry while sounding bored, “that my features are distinctive. So I’ve no doubt you are all perfectly well aware that the photographs depict me. The one moderately intelligent question any of you might ask is whether they were digitally altered. So far as I know, they were not. It should therefore also be apparent to you that I was underage when the events thus recorded took place. Are there any other questions?”

“Did you know the sender?” “Was his name really Jim Moriarty?” “Is he the same one who took the pictures?” “Any idea why he sent them?”

Sherlock responds only to this last.

“To induce your sort to come after me like so many dogs after a fox, of course.” The bored tone never misses a note. “Good night.”
John’s grandparents were a plumber, a telephone operator, and two shopkeepers; there are times when Sherlock’s RP and his disdainfulness and his absurdly beautiful clothes set the Watson teeth on edge.

This is not one of those times. *Use every weapon you have, love. Every last one.*

When they reach Baker Street, Sherlock has to close his eyes for a moment against the camera flashes. He feels John take his wrist and lets himself be pulled through the lights and noise, registering dimly that John uses his own key to let them in, and that this will likely lead to more speculation than already exists concerning the relationship between them. *Consider that I might easily have handed him my key while we were in the car,* he doesn’t say.

They go up the seventeen steps without Sherlock’s foot catching on any of them. He should chart his symptoms every day against the amount of walking and running he does, if he wants to know how rapidly the postpolio syndrome is progressing, as it seems to be.

The flat is the same. Sherlock curls his lip at himself: that the flat is unchanged should not strike him as marvelous. John has already closed the kitchen curtains. He has a way of looking and not-looking at what makes him angry and that was what he did to the crowd on the pavement outside 221 while he closed the curtains: look and not-look. John never got his cane back from that murderous diamond merchant’s flat. Pity. Sherlock could have adjusted it to his own height. It would have been a memento of that first evening. The elation.

Here is Billy the skull, also a memento: Sir William Maastricht had gratefully bequeathed his own cadaver to Sherlock for anatomical studies, because Sherlock had recovered his late wife’s wedding ring (*sentiment*) from an inept housebreaker who was not however so inept as to have been caught by the police. Sir William had paid Sherlock well in money, too. Sherlock had been clean just over two years at that point, and the money made him think hard about cocaine, so instead he had paid his landlord a year’s rent in advance. That was the flat in Montague Street. Dark and noisy, but it was what Sherlock could afford in those days without recourse to his inheritance, and he was doing his best to ignore his inheritance, in the service of ignoring cocaine.

He sits on the sofa and thinks about cocaine now.

Also heroin. He hadn’t liked heroin, back then, but it might be worth another look, if what he wants is not to sharpen his mind but to quiet it. There was a junkie he saw once, when he was staying with Sarita in New York, who had ridden to the top of the escalator at the West Fourth Street subway stop but couldn’t quite organize himself to step off; the escalator moved slowly, so the junkie didn’t tumble down but only rocked backward and forward, backward and forward, dozing into his chest. Sherlock had found the sight entrancing, like the movement of a cradle, and had watched for several minutes in tranquility.

A sound in front of him turns out to be John setting down a mug of tea, and a plate that holds three plain McVitie’s spread with jam, three plain McVitie’s spread with nothing, and three small slices of Cheddar.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You never notice when you’re hungry,” John says, mildly: “I only know because the food disappears off *my* plate. Have you eaten at all today?”
As before, utilitarian considerations suggest that as John has a wish, and Sherlock does not (except for cocaine and/or heroin, which wouldn’t be well received, besides which his promise to Sarita has already obtruded itself upon his consciousness), John’s wish may as well be realized. Sherlock drinks and eats. He is not sure whether “better” is the right word for what he feels when he has finished the tea and biscuits, but John seems to have been right about his being hungry. He spares a moment to loathe the transport, with its needs and its betrayals (“The great likelihood, as you have surmised, is that I am gravely ill”…), and allows to return to his awareness the fact that he has no idea what comes next.

* 

The man who is the British government is remembering that once upon a time, in connection with his younger brother, he wished he had real power. But what might real power be?

He could shut down certain of the darknet server farms hosting sites where Jim might have posted the photos of Sherlock. Thereby he would accomplish — nothing, for there were other server farms hosting other sites, from which those with a taste for unwillingly-willing adolescents would already have downloaded the photos, ready to upload them again in a week, or two, or sometime next year. Meanwhile the political dissidents who also relied on those servers would have lost vital communications, with consequences the man who is the British government can’t permit.

He could assign his own hackers to wipe the photo files from every computer on the network of every media outlet in the UK, and that of the Metropolitan Police, and of Her Majesty’s Government as well. But leave the photos where they are, and if Sherlock keeps his head down, they may be a nine-days’ wonder, to be replaced by the next outrage and the next: never forgotten, quite, but over months and years drifting far from immediate attention. On the other hand, if the photo files vanish without explanation, the resulting political furore will make the mobile-phone hacking scandal look like tea in Mayfair. (And rightly, Mycroft has to admit, given the Orwellian possibilities thereby exposed.) Sherlock’s misery will be rehashed in public for years.

The last time Mycroft Holmes had any power that mattered, he was at an Italian restaurant in Kensington, watching his younger brother flinch from the touch of Jim Moriarty’s hand.

* 

John tidies the kitchen, washes and puts away the plate from which Sherlock ate the biscuits, and commences to build a fire. Sherlock thinks vaguely that he should send John home; instead, he watches John move about the flat as one might watch — well, a fire: for the sake of mindless comfort, which is presumably why John is building one on this summer night.

Then John takes out Sherlock’s bottle of Knappogue Castle and pours amply into two tumblers. Whiskey by the fire: Trite, Sherlock tells himself. Nevertheless he takes the glass John hands him and motions toward the empty part of the sofa. John sits, sips, clears his throat. “How long do you figure it’ll last?” he asks.

A flicker of some feeling passes through Sherlock. Oh, yes. Anger. “The Internet is forever, haven’t you heard? The answer to your question is, Until I’m dead, and for some while thereafter.”

“But it won’t always be front and center. Those — people — outside, they’ll move on to the next thing. Moriarty’s dead, so there won’t be a kidnapping trial” — Sherlock starts; he had forgotten about the boy. Callum Wolfe — “They’ll have to investigate the suicide, there’s that. But if there aren’t any charges, and you keep refusing to comment — ”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Sherlock’s laptop is on the table in front of him; he re-enables comments on
his website and John’s blog and leaves each open in a tab of its own. “Now, while we wait, take a few moments to enjoy some of the many texts and voicemails on my phone.”

John frowns in obvious puzzlement, but complies. As he works his way through the messages he begins cursing under his breath. When ten minutes has elapsed Sherlock interrupts him and refreshes the comments pages. Forty-two comments on The Science of Deduction; twenty more on The Casebook of Deduction. A reversal of the usual ratio, no doubt because, under the circumstances, visitors wished to communicate with Sherlock directly. More than half the comments, somewhat to Sherlock’s surprise, are, though misguided … not unkind. The others, however … He watches John’s consternation grow as he reads.

xxxboy: id love to get you like that your so hot

mancunian_ephebephile: Wish I’d known you back in the day! You were quite the poster boy for the beauty of the adolescent male — fresh, and all a-tumult.

RowanY: Fuck, that’s juicy.

… and so on.

“So you see.”

John sees.

* 

Once John has got Sherlock clear of the reporters outside the Yard, Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade orders a downtrodden PC to locate the nearest source of espresso and return with a triple. When PC and espresso arrive, he dismisses the first, gulps down the second, and considers his options. This is not the most tactful hour at which to beard his superiors, but if he waits till morning then every single Yard employee with a computer will have seen James Moriarty’s email before anything else can be done. Here goes nothing. He phones his boss, and then his boss’s boss, and his boss’s boss’s boss, until sometime around five he finds himself on his way to meet with three people: the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, the Commissioner of the City of London Police, and the Director of Public Prosecutions for England and Wales. His heart pounds embarrassingly; he reminds himself that he’d have to be an idiot not to feel nervous at the prospect of what he’s about to ask these eminences. Two memories, in particular, keep him setting one foot in front of the other: a postcard remarking that a corpse may be dismembered without recourse to an electric saw; and the sight of a handcuffed cokehead reaching into a rubbish bin to pull out a bundle of brown paper concealing the most beautiful bird Lestrade has ever seen.

He makes his case. The two police commissioners mutter inconclusively; it’s Elisabeth Wolseley who matters here. The DPP pauses only briefly. “You do realize that what you are asking us to do could well be seen as destroying evidence.”

“Lady Wolseley” — Lestrade had the sense to Google “how to address a baroness” before leaving his office — “the perpetrator is dead. There’s no one to prosecute. Sherlock — ”

Elisabeth Wolseley looks at him sharply. “He’s not just a consultant, then. A friend?”

Lestrade makes a noncommittal face, but his hope fades. If the Director of Public Prosecutions decides there’s anything shady about this, well, shadier than that Moriarty bloke … “I dunno if he’d call me his friend. I’ve known him a long time. Yeah — Yes, a friend. But — Look, it’s all over YouTube, the clip of him talking to the press, you can see all he wants is — ”
“I need to hear it from him directly. You have his mobile number, I presume?”

But Sherlock doesn’t answer. Neither does John. Lestrade begs for one more try.


John has somehow talked Sherlock into at least trying to sleep a few hours; he himself is dozing on the couch when Mrs. Hudson bursts in. “It’s the inspector, John. He says it’s urgent, he’s got to speak to Sherlock right away.”

“He’s asleep, at least I hope he is — Greg? … Oh. Oh, you — how did you … ? Never mind, let me …” John hands the phone back to Mrs. Hudson and gets up to wake Sherlock.


FROM: glestrade@met.police.uk
TO: johnhwatson@btinternet.com
SUBJECT: FW: Urgent to All Staff

John — Sent this to Sherlock but it bounced, same for your email via his site. No wonder, I guess.

Don’t know if he’ll want to see it, but I figured I’d give him the option anyhow.

This is a rough patch. Hope he knows he’s got friends.

G.

FROM: Office of the Commissioner, Metropolitan Police / Office of the Commissioner, City of London Police
TO: Metropolitan Police [all addresses]; City of London Police [all addresses]
SUBJECT: Urgent to All Staff

As many of you are already aware, every email address associated with our two forces, as well as the Home Office, the Foreign Office, and many media outlets in the United Kingdom, received an email with attached file yesterday evening. The sender was identified as “Professor James Moriarty” and the email purported to come from the domain of University College London.

The emails constitute evidence of a serious sexual offense; indeed, their very existence and their distribution violate the Protection of Children Act 1978. However, “Professor Moriarty” died by his own hand immediately after the email and files were sent. According to the official statement provided by the victim of the sexual offense, he acted alone with respect to both the underlying crime and the distribution of the images. Consequently there can be no prosecution with respect to these offenses.
“Professor Moriarty” has also been implicated in a number of other offenses in which it is highly probable that he had accomplices. Investigation into these activities will continue under the aegis of the National Crime Agency in cooperation with the Border Force.

In accordance with the victim’s wishes and on advice from Baroness Elisabeth Wolseley, Director of Public Prosecutions for England and Wales, the email and file from “Professor Moriarty” have been deleted from our servers. It is the Commissioners’ understanding that the Home Office and Foreign Office are following suit. The DPP has retained a copy of the email, the file, and the associated server logs, as well as the actual computer from which the email was sent, in the event that these are needed in investigation or prosecution of a crime of which the police are as yet unaware. A public statement to this effect will follow.

We remind all staff that the transfer of the email or the associated file to another device may also constitute a violation of the Protection of Children Act, and be prosecuted as such. The same applies to invitations to others to view the file. The attention of editors and managers of media outlets has also been drawn to this consideration.

“Sherlock,” John says, “you should see this.”

Sherlock reads the forwarded email once, twice; three times. “I thought Wolseley was looking for cover for a failure to investigate Moriarty further.” He falls into silence, staring at the email on the laptop screen. “But this is ... Lestrade appears to have persuaded her into an attempt to …”

“… to protect you,” John supplies, when Sherlock fails to complete the sentence. He nudges his friend’s shoulder and points to the last sentence of Greg’s email. “I told you, that time you thought he was warning me off. Greg thinks a lot of you.”

Sherlock continues frowning at the email.

*

Phil Anderson snorts. “It’s a coverup.”

Sally Donovan doesn’t snort. It’s ten in the morning, she’s barely slept, and she can’t work up enough energy. She is brushing her teeth. She spits out the toothpaste, rinses, takes a breath. She thinks about how she trapped Holmes into admitting he was the one who worked out that Edward Lucas was beating his wife, Arabella, on the regular before she killed him. Even after that little revelation, Sally wouldn’t have predicted, twenty-four hours ago, that the Freak’s reaction to a raped kid would be to pick the locks on his collar and cuffs and cover him with that precious coat, the one that had to cost more than a detective sergeant brings home in two months. And then he bolted. …

She rinses and spits again, thinking. “You know what, Phil, that’s fine with me if it is.” Has Phil ever looked so much like a weasel? A disapproving weasel?

The thought strikes Sally, not for the first time, that she’s cleverer than Phil, and that she has no reason to hurt his wife. The thought she does have for the first time is this: that Philip Anderson is who she settled for because, never mind her progressive opinions and numerous counseling sessions, she is still living as though being raped in a loo had left her unworthy of anything better.
Phil is staring at her; she must have left quite a silence. Well, she wouldn’t be Sally Donovan if she remained speechless for long. “Phil,” she says — and, yep, this is the right move, she can tell because her heart clatters like a cage door opening, “I’m really sorry, but …”

*  

From: Morris Hays, Editor, The Star-News  
To: All Staff  
Subject: Moriarty/Holmes coverage

“… Accordingly, the photographs have been deleted from our servers. All staff are reminded that their willful retention may constitute possession of child pornography and their sharing or downloading to other devices may constitute distribution. We will, of course, continue to cover the story. …”

*  

Death of a predator

James Moriarty, 45: failed doctoral candidate at University College London; smuggler of refugees; and, it seems, the obsessed sexual abuser of the renowned consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, shot himself fatally on the evening of June 14 — but not before sending a mass email …

*  

Fiend emails sex pix  
round the world  
… and escapes justice!

Victim Holmes says, “I was underage”

*  

“Oh, for — ” Lestrade throws his coffee against the office wall. Fortunately paper cups don’t shatter, but he has to spend half an hour cleaning the mess.

*  

“Holmes was questioned in Moriarty’s death but the Met have issued a statement declaring it a suicide and exonerating Holmes completely. We now go to the video of Holmes speaking as he left New Scotland Yard early this morning. …”

The Beeb at least has the decency to show the whole statement, including Sherlock’s parting shot. On Sky News, the audio cuts off just before.

*  

When Martha Hudson was eighteen she bolted from Stepney to the States. By her nineteenth birthday, she was earning her keep as an exotic dancer, wearing feathers and sequins (“but not many of either”), in a then insalubrious district of Miami. The money was enough to live on, as long as she let the punters handle her. At sixty-one she had been married for three decades, the last two of which
comprised many days and nights spent in mortal terror. Now she is seventy-four and therefore, by definition, respectable and none too swift. She owns a shabby but well-constructed house in Marylebone, where she lives comfortably on the ground floor; and, to her eternal relief, she is widowed, thanks to a tall, posh, skinny, insufferably rude, and rather strange-looking creature, just recently off cocaine, who showed up one day on her Florida doorstep wanting to rent her spare room. She still doesn’t know what made her agree; but instinct served her better in her choice of tenant than it had when it came to a husband.

The reporters clamored in Baker Street until more or less five in the morning, when it became obvious that neither Sherlock nor John would emerge. At that point the crowd thinned, but by half eight it has reassembled itself. By late morning, the widow Hudson has had enough. She looks over her inventory of baking supplies and augments them with a quick trip to Boots. She also has a word with the proprietor of every restaurant, takeaway, and café within a three-street radius of home.

On her way out and also on her way back in, she says, “Oh, I wouldn’t know anything, dear,” to the microphones thrust in her face. She keeps her eyes down and does her best to look as if she might’ve had one too many herbal soothers already that day. It isn’t difficult. When she reemerges an hour and a half later, almost everybody there takes a couple of the still-warm oatmeal biscuits she offers round, and accepts a plastic cup of orange squash. “How tiring your work must be,” she tells them. They all but pat Martha Hudson on the head.

True, the squash tastes more sour and mineral-ish than usual, but that’s just by contrast with the sweetness of the biscuits. Isn’t it?

* 

By 17:00, the only journalist left outside 221B is the diabetic, who naturally refused both biscuits and squash. Mrs. Hudson considers dropping a brick on his head from the kitchen window of Sherlock’s flat, but it wouldn’t do to implicate her lodger, whereas she is just an old lady who couldn’t possibly be blamed for mixing up a couple of ingredients while cooking.

“Yoo-hoo!” she says, at the top of the seventeen steps. John opens the door. His expression is tired and irritable. Sherlock is sat at the kitchen table staring into a mug of no doubt untouched tea.

John looks at the packages Mrs. Hudson is holding. “Miralax? Magnesium citrate? I’m sorry, Mrs. Hudson, are you — er, having trouble with your bowels? Because either of those really should — ”

But Sherlock, bless him, is already at the window looking down at the nearly empty pavement. “You were baking,” he says.

“And isn’t it the funniest thing?” Mrs. Hudson replies. “All the loos in all the shops round here are out of order.”

John looks back and forth between her and Sherlock. She’s pleased to see his mouth hanging open a bit. He’s a good man, John Watson, but he sometimes underestimates her. “I expect they’ll be back,” she continues, “but maybe not so many of them, next time. It’s a bit of a breather for you, anyhow.”

For a moment, Sherlock seemed on the verge of hilarity, but that moment has passed; he only nods, remaining by the window, his gaze remote. Mrs. Hudson sighs and makes an empty-hands gesture toward John. She is still holding the containers of laxative.

* 

From: billmurray1970@btinternet.com
To: johnhwatson@btinternet.com

Subject: holy hell

… I’m not asking, it’s not my business, but you should know there are rumors about what’s in the pictures, and if they’re true then -- I don’t even know what to say about somebody who turns a kid inside out like that. It’s good he’s got you, anyway. I hope he can talk to you.

*

Why don’t you come after me, too, @SkyNews? #NotHolmesAlone

Exploiting an adolescent’s kinks is still #rape. #NotHolmesAlone

@TheSunNewspaper Shame on you. Just another set of predators. #NotHolmesAlone

Wish I could be that brave about #rape. #NotHolmesAlone

me too: 16 years old, didn’t know better, went back for more #NotHolmesAlone

I was 15, all hormones no self-preservation, another easy mark #NotHolmesAlone

Media reaction to sex abuse: Hunt down the victim. #NotHolmesAlone

Let him be. #NotHolmesAlone [retweeted 4,879 times; favorited 15,445 times]

*

“In the past 24 hours, the hashtag #NotHolmesAlone has exploded on Twitter and Instagram in an outcry against coverage of the images distributed worldwide by the sex predator identifying himself as Professor Moriarty. Moriarty is dead by his own hand, but ironically the hashtag meant to express support for his famous victim may be keeping his ugly legacy alive …”

*

From: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

To: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

Subject: FFS
The BBC is being tastefully restrained but that’s bad enough. I would never have thought I could feel trapped aboard an oceanographic research vessel. We dock in two weeks. I would snatch you out of London if I could.

I believe you have more friends than you know.

All my love,

Sarita

From: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu
To: jhwatson@scienceofdeduction.uk.com; johnhwatson@btinternet.com

John — I’ve been trying to reach Sherlock but his email address is bouncing and phone service from Atlantis is spotty ATM. If this email reaches you please give him my love. Remind him he has friends. I find I’m unable to prevent myself from begging you not to let him drive you away, however hard he tries.

Atlantis is due to dock in two weeks. I’ll keep trying to reach Sherlock in the meantime.

Warmly,

Sarita Banerjee

When John shows him the email, Sherlock presses his lips together and looks away. “You may tell her I said thank you.”

“You won’t write to her yourself?”

Sherlock shrugs.

*

John remains at Baker Street for three days and nights, sleeping on the musty bed upstairs, bringing Sherlock tea and McVitie’s for breakfast, picking up takeaway for their suppers. He visits his bedsit only to retrieve his phone and laptop and a change of clothes.

*

Sherlock passes from couch, to bed, to couch, and back again. He uses the loo. He eats and drinks what John places in front of him morning and evening, on the same principle as he has done whatever John suggests since Sherlock failed to kill Jim: that, as only one of them has a wish, and that one is John, he, Sherlock, may as well accede.

He doesn’t smoke cigarettes, because he has none left and John will not bring him any. He has nicotine patches: these John does supply.

Sometimes he thinks, in a desultory way, about sex. Sex with Jim, sex with John. He used to want sex, urgently and in spite of himself. Now when Sherlock holds his penis to urinate it seems more like an appliance than a part of him, or even than an enemy.
The sensation he had, at Scotland Yard, of hearing speech, all sounds, as if from the other end of a long corridor is continuously with him now.

*

From: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

To: johnhwatson@btinternet.com

Remind him that he made me a promise. It’s a bit heavyhanded of me to bring it up just now, but tough.

Sherlock sniffs and turns his face toward the back of the couch.

“Sherlock.”

“Yes, fine, she’s reminded me.” Even the anger of that first night is missing now.

*

By the third evening, the silence from 221B has largely persuaded the media to move on. Reporters turn up only occasionally, and that via text; besides, John’s taken off all the time he can from the clinic, and, though he hates to admit it, Sherlock’s getting on his nerves, has thrown up a speechless wall pierced only by infrequent and half-hearted snarls. Is John even doing any good?

That question’s answered, provisionally anyhow, when, early on the fourth morning, John brings Sherlock his tea and tells him he’s going. Sherlock’s face shutters — shutters more; John says: “I’ll bring you that good duck soup tonight, from the place near work.” And thinks: You’re driving me mad. I love you so fucking much; please be okay. And doesn’t know how to say it.

*

They spend days in this holding pattern. Sherlock does not leave the flat. John gets up and brings him tea in the morning, goes off to the clinic, over his lunch break stops at his own flat to pick up the next day’s clothes, chooses takeaway he can cajole Sherlock into eating, and goes to Baker Street, where he sleeps in the bed upstairs — less musty now, because since he’s apparently half moved in he has aired the room and stood the mattress up against the open window to pound out the dust. A bombing in Paris; an earthquake in Italy; the civil war in Syria; the U.S. election news — the broadsheets and the Beeb have moved on to these. The tabloids and infotainment sites are still expressing daily indignation over SEX PERVERTS TWISTING KIDS. Why can’t Harry or Will be caught in flagrante with one of their grandmother’s Corgis, for God’s sake?

Every day there is an email from Sarita, which John answers over dinner. Sherlock barely speaks. One day Molly Hooper drops by John’s clinic to leave some tissue samples from a poisoning case, packed in a cooler with dry ice, and John brings the cooler to Baker Street with him that evening; but Sherlock ignores it. When John opens it two days later, the samples have gone off and are unusable. The card Molly left on top of the samples has picked up something of a pong but John insists that Sherlock open it anyway. She must have made it herself. The cover photo is a downloaded image of Maru, the Japanese cat YouTube star, cramming himself, as is his practice, into a tiny cardboard box. Inside Molly has written, “Other people’s ideas about you just don’t fit,” as John sees after Sherlock sets it aside. And “Stop by the morgue any time, there’s always something interesting to study xo Molly.”
John might have expected Sherlock to mock the card, but he doesn’t. Neither of them bins it.

*

On the ninth day after Jim Moriarty killed himself, John arrives at Baker Street after work to see a tall, pudgy teenager in chinos and a badly fitting suit jacket waiting on the pavement by the front door, chewing his lips. Too young to be a reporter, but God only knows what he wants; John angles himself to shoulder past.

“D-Doctor Watson?”

John turns, ready to deliver a bollocking.

“It’s — it’s Callum Wolfe, sir. From the — the —”

To his shame, John comes within a hair of saying what is true: *I didn’t recognize you with your clothes on*. “Yes,” he manages. “You — ah — how are you doing?”

Callum looks down and away. His face is bright red. “I don’t know. Well, I’ve got a counselor and all —” And, still speaking to the pavement: “The inspector, Lestrade? He said Mr. Holmes worked out where — where I was. And then you both — I wanted to thank you. He said Mr. Holmes was here pretty much all the time, because, because of the, the news and all, and he said you were staying here too, so — but nobody answered the bell, so I thought I’d wait —” He makes as if to cross his arms in front of his chest, then drops them.

“Did — did your mum bring you?”

“She’s at the Starbucks down the way. She — I used to go out by myself all the time, but — but that’s not — I just wanted to say thank you. Do you think I could see Mr. Holmes? Say it to him in person.”

“Sorry about the bell. We kind of gave up answering it after, um, that night.” What to say about Sherlock? “I don’t know what he’s up for right now”? “He’s been having a tough time”? When Callum Wolfe, who is fifteen, has been waiting outside the flat for God knows how long. “Let me just make sure Sherlock’s up.”

*

“No.”

“Sherlock. He wants to thank you.”

“Not interested.”

“How can you not be interested?”

Sherlock has been sitting in a corner of the couch with his knees drawn up; now he stands. The look he gives John is poisonous. “Oh, am I meant to feel some affinity with my fellow victim, is that it? And does he see me as his hero? Well, there are no heroes, John, and if there were I wouldn’t be one of them.”

John is almost dizzy with disappointment and anger. “You are full of shit. You found him. You picked the locks on his collar and cuffs. You covered him with your precious fucking coat. Don’t fucking tell me you’re not a hero, I was there. What am I meant to tell him?”
“Tell him what I’m telling you. I don’t care. Tell him whatever you like."

“Jesus. For a hero, you’re the most selfish, arrogant, self-pitying — ”

John slams the flat door behind him.

*

Sherlock’s chest hurts as if someone has run a battering ram against it. He looks down from the kitchen window at John: shaking his head, making apologetic gestures. Callum Wolfe nods, seems to slump though it’s hard to judge from above, and turns toward the south end of the street.

“Wait,” Sherlock manages to say, but only John hears. Callum keeps walking. Sherlock hasn’t got his braces on and he’s barefoot. He runs down the stairs anyway.

Callum has turned around again and stands looking toward 221B. Sherlock looks away from John and away from him; says, through his dry throat, “Won’t you come up.”

Chapter End Notes

For Sarita’s communications, see here and here.
The landscape after cruelty which is, of course, a garden

Chapter Summary


This chapter contains explicit, gruesome descriptions of Jim's body and the scene in his apartment after his suicide.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Richard Siken's "Snow and Dirty Rain":

My dragonfly,
my black-eyed fire, the knives in the kitchen are singing for blood, but we are the crossroads, my little outlaw, and this is the map of my heart, the landscape after cruelty which is, of course, a garden, which is a tenderness, which is a room, a lover saying Hold me tight, it's getting cold.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Callum Wolfe says no thank you Dr. Watson to John’s offer of tea. “I don’t — I know you must be” — and here he seems, belatedly, to register Sherlock’s bare feet and dressing gown — “busy?” He blushes, blotchy.

Sherlock, sitting perfectly upright in his chair, has said nothing since he changed his mind and invited Callum in. Now he does speak, and what he says is this:

“Should I have killed him?”

Callum’s “What?” and John’s “Sherlock!” overlap precisely.


As if — thanking a caller after a funeral, John thinks.

But though one might have thought him dismissed, Callum remains seated. “No, I thought about that. I’ve been thinking about it the whole time. It’s kind of — I like the idea, okay?” His voice wobbles. “What he did to you. It was even worse than — than — ” In the effort not to cry, he squeezes his whole face together. His neck is red as well as his face. His hands clutch each other in his lap. “Than what he did to me,” he manages at last. “So to think about you shooting him dead, it — yeah.”
Sherlock bows his head, as if accepting judgment, perhaps. John is furious with both of them — with Callum, unreasonably, for being fifteen; with Sherlock, for accepting the revenge fantasies of a traumatized fifteen-year-old as an ethical guide. But Callum goes on:

“Only, that was what he wanted, right? At least, uh, that’s what they said on the. Um, news. He was going to make you a deal?”

Sherlock nods once.

“But — but see — ” Callum starts speaking faster: he has hold of his intent now. “It was what he wanted you to do. Shoot him I mean. So then it had to be wrong, right?” (John winces: surely Sherlock will pounce on this? But Sherlock doesn’t.) “I mean, he wasn’t nice to you. He didn’t — he wasn’t your friend, or — He was awful, oh God.” The boy’s face convulses again and he draws in a long breath and says, all in a rush: “So, so if it was something he wanted you to do then it had to be bad for you. It had to be. So it was good that you didn’t do it, because you, you — When you put your coat on me — ”

This is as much as Callum Wolfe can manage; he sobs, wet and blubbery. Sherlock is staring at him. John brings over a wad of kitchen roll for Callum to blow his nose.

“I never did,” Sherlock says, over Callum’s honk. “Cry, that is. Possibly it wasn’t my wisest choice.”

Callum, who of course doesn’t know Sherlock well enough to find this statement astonishing, reacts as one does to a bad but comforting joke: he laughs a little, honks into the kitchen roll again and again. By the time his phone pings with an incoming text, he’s settled down enough to say, “Oh, shit, that’s my mum, I forgot. She wants me to text her every fifteen minutes,” he explains, thumbing his phone. “If she isn’t with me. Because of — ”

“Yes, I think I can work out why.” But there’s no sting in Sherlock’s tone, and his smile is a real one, John is touched to see, small and uncertain and friendly.

Callum nods, biting his lip — the gesture makes him look, startlingly, like Sherlock for a split second — and stands. “Anyway, I — well, that’s it, I guess, I just felt like I should say thanks. To both of you.” He looks at John and flushes brilliant red all over again. John reaches out to shake hands, but Callum draws him in for a hug and then, possibly not only to Sherlock and John’s astonishment but to his own, does the same with Sherlock, who goes wide-eyed but, John notes, doesn’t actually object.

And Sherlock says, “You’ll meet — all sorts. But not likely — not another of him. You should remember that.”

“Yes,” Callum replies, “you too” — and that might be just the reflex that makes people utter awkward reciprocations at parting, but Sherlock blinks, as if the import of his own words hadn’t occurred to him — “okay, um, I better go meet my mum.” With which he’s gone.

“I’m sorry I shouted at you, earlier,” John says, as soon as the street door has closed.

“It was richly deserved,” Sherlock replies, sounding absent. “Don’t worry about it.” Then, abruptly focused again: “John, he isn’t clever at all, yet he understands — something I didn’t grasp. How is that possible?” And, misunderstanding the look on John’s face: “No, don’t be jealous. You and Dr. Banerjee know me better than anyone. No one else could — I couldn’t have tolerated any other — His knowledge isn’t particular to me, you see, it’s a general understanding, but that’s just what’s so remarkable about it.”
This is almost as many words as John has heard from Sherlock in the past week. “Did you really not know?” he asks. “I mean, not know that you did right?”

Sherlock arrests his pacing and turns toward John, fast enough to make the hem of his dressing gown wrap itself around his calves and fall away again, graceful. “You don’t disagree, then?” He has woven his fingers together and stands with his hands clasped at his breast, like an illustration of prayer in a catechism.

“Kind of surprised there was any question, really.”

“I wanted to do it,” Sherlock replies. “No, I couldn’t get even so far; I thought, I ought to want to do this; I ought to do it. But what I wanted was to go home.”

“Did you” (and this John asks with great trepidation) “feel something for him?”

“A lingering attachment, you mean?” Sherlock’s voice is dry. “No. I’m quite content to imagine the splatter pattern made by the bits of his brain and skull on the floor. The wall was a good twenty feet behind him and it might be useful, in the context of other investigations, to know whether any of the material made it so far.”

John is surprised to learn, from his own gulping laugh, that he’s still shockable. And: Sherlock has made something like a joke, about Jim. And: other investigations. This is the first hint John has had in the past nine days that Sherlock may see, even faintly, a future for his work. Lest Sherlock balk at hearing this hope spoken aloud, John says nothing.

As for Sherlock, he is still thinking about his — it seems John would say failure is the wrong word, but no other comes to mind — his failure, then, to kill Moriarty.

“I do wonder what these past few days might have been like had I brought myself to fire that gun. It’s curiously difficult to imagine, apart from the absence of any call for Mrs. Hudson’s culinary skills.”

“It would have corrupted you.” The words emerge from John instantly, as if, unawares, he has had them ready all this time.

“John.” Sherlock is looking at his own hands; on his face, an expression of distaste. “You are the only person I have ever desired apart from Jim. Even in the midst of — sexual activity — with you, I could think of nothing but Jim. Do you still not understand that that man permeates me? Every thought, every cell — ”

John hears, months ago, Sarita Banerjee’s voice: “He believes himself to be damaged. Even, I daresay, corrupt,” and Sherlock, the first time he and John spoke directly about Jim, saying of himself, “I did arrive pre-rubbished, as it were.” Airy. “You’re wrong.” John says now, “and I can prove it.”

Sherlock inclines his head: Just try, the motion signifies.

“How d’you think Jim would have treated Callum, eh? Oh, wait — we know exactly how he did treat Callum: he kidnapped him and stripped him naked and terrified him and abused and humiliated him and sent the Yard and his mother pictures. Whereas you, Sherlock Holmes, rescued him. Also, you were very bloody kind to him just now, don’t think I didn’t see that. And there’s the little matter of how you didn’t commit a murder you would have got away with.”

“Don’t be an idiot. ‘Got away with.’ I would have had to lie to you. For the rest of my life, if you remained my friend that long. It didn’t seem … feasible.”
Is John about to win an argument with Sherlock Holmes? Perhaps so: “Which only makes my case that much stronger, doesn’t it?”

Silence.

John presses his advantage: “So don’t give me this rubbish about Jim corrupting you. You have — you have the purest heart of anyone I’ve ever met.”

Sherlock actually gapes at this.

“Yeah, I did say my parents went in for psalm reading and that, so winch up your jaw. It just amazes me, you know, how you see so much but you have no bloody clue when it comes to things other people see as plain as day.”

“Not Anderson.”

If Sherlock’s resorting to the example of Anderson ... ! “Anderson’s a tosser and he thinks the whole world is exactly like himself. He’s disqualified. You want to go through the list of everybody else who knows you? Even Donovan thinks a lot better of you than she lets on.”

Sherlock, having just learned this himself in recent days (but how did John know it? yes, of course, the night of Jim’s suicide; John and Donovan must have spoken then), has nothing to say. They eat takeaway. John watches telly. Sherlock perches in his chair, knees drawn up, hands steepled, not exactly thinking.

Only after John has gone upstairs for the night does Sherlock open the door of his Mind Palace and step inside. He finds the room dedicated to Jim (it’s meant to be locked, but his Mind Palace persists in the bad joke of insisting that the lock is broken) and draws out of their cabinet (door askew; hinge missing) the photographs of himself and the photographs of Callum Wolfe. There are many fewer of Callum, but for Sherlock’s purpose there are enough.

He lays the photographs out in pairs, Callum | Sherlock; Sherlock | Callum, choosing in each case examples in which the subject’s facial expression is visible. He permits himself to feel relieved that he need not take out of storage any of the photographs in which he is gagged or those in which Jim’s cock or fingers are in his mouth. (These lift themselves out of the ramshackle cabinet and drift to the floor around Sherlock’s feet.) If anyone were in the sitting room of 221B, they would see Sherlock’s eyelids flutter and his fingers whiten where they press together. The Sherlock inside the Mind Palace examines the photographs on the table before him (and ignores those on the floor when they lift up at the corners and undulate at him).

On Callum’s face, a rictus of misery.

On Sherlock’s face, a rictus of lust.

Rictus of misery.

Rictus of lust.

Rictus of misery.

Rictus of —

Sherlock lifts the remembered photograph of himself off the table to study it more closely. Lust misery lust misery lustmiserylustmisery: both present, mutually inextricable, they might as well be the yolk and the white of a beaten egg. Now that he sees this, he sees that the same is true of all the
photographs Jim made of him. On the way to Jim’s flat he used to feel — used to feel that he was in a place where he would never be found, and that he was suffocating. As if pressed into one of those nightmare compartments that shrink around one till there is just space to crouch, never to open one’s chest and fill it with air.

Sherlock takes a deep breath.

*This is what you have,* he used to remind himself.

He looks and looks and looks at the dark-haired boy with pale skin and tilted eyes. The boy used to yearn, Sherlock remembers: yearn toward nothing that he then understood. Upstairs, John is sleeping. Sherlock has seen him sleep — sleep deeply, sleep nighttime sleep and not just the head-dropped doze of a tired traveler — only once: the night they had sex, after Guildford, for the few minutes before Sherlock slipped out of the bed and drew a cloak of ice around himself so that he might not yearn. He gets up, scattering the photographs, and emerges from the Mind Palace. Up the stairs to the second bedroom, it’s no distance at all. But his footsteps might wake John, and then there would be explanations to make that Sherlock is not sure he is yet able to produce. Perhaps he doesn’t know, even, what they are. So he goes to his own room instead and there, lulled by the imagined sound of John’s breathing, he sleeps.

*

In the morning, Sherlock drinks tea and eats toast in a manner that draws John’s pleased attention, expressed with a raised eyebrow. “I slept well,” Sherlock offers, which is the truth, though he hopes John won’t take the opening to press him with questions just yet. John does give a long considering look (rather like one of Sherlock’s own, if Sherlock but knew it), but then catches sight of the time, so that whatever inquiry he might have framed is superseded by “Oh, sodding hell.”

*

Sherlock showers and then dresses in his favorite narrow black suit. He turns on the phone and two hundred forty-three texts appear, which he ignores along with the innumerable missed calls. At least his voicemail must have been full since the first night. He is about to text Lestrade when he remembers Donovan’s card, in the pocket of the trousers he was wearing … Like Lestrade, she will have the access he needs, and potentially she will engage in no tedious attempts to investigate his reasons. She had been surprisingly astute when —

Well. Sherlock steadies his hands against the kitchen counter where he has fetched up in his pacing.

Donovan picks up on the first ring and says, “Holmes,” so matter-of-factly that he offers no preamble but simply tells her what he wants.

“*You’re sure? What am I saying, of course you’d want to see them. You going to tell us we botched the investigation and you did it after all?”*

Sherlock had not ever expected to feel toward Donovan what he feels now, which is liking. He smiles at the phone. “*Really, Sergeant Donovan. The Met had my input; therefore there was no possibility of error.*”

She sucks her teeth at him. “*Come in now, before I get called out on anything else.*”

“*Of course.*”

*

Mrs. Hudson is sweeping the patch of floor and corridor outside her flat. This has nothing at all to do
with the precise timing of Sherlock’s descent. “Don’t you look handsome?” she says, as she generally does, and (Sherlock identifies three notes: cheery; somewhat strained; hopeful) “Off to work on a case, then?”

“Mm,” Sherlock “replies,” and then, on an impulse he doesn’t immediately inspect, “No. I’m going to Scotland Yard to look at the evidentiary photographs of James Moriarty’s corpse and its surroundings.”

Mrs. Hudson claps her hands to her mouth. “Oh, Sherlock! What an idea! You know, after my husband was electrocuted, they would only let me have the death certificate, and it was the longest time before I really felt sure that he was gone for good, even though you and everybody else told me he was, and the chaplain even tried to console me for my loss, if you can imagine such a thing. — Anyway, you’ll feel so much better when you’ve had a good long look. Off with you, now, I can’t be chatting all day.”

Sherlock hasn’t consciously thought of it in over a decade — how, after the execution, and before Sherlock moved back to London, while he was still Mrs. Hudson’s Florida tenant, he used to hear, two or three times a week, a gasping, chanted “No” proliferating in the dark, the audio portion of his landlady’s recurring nightmare: that her husband had survived the electric chair and somehow or other melted through the walls of the prison mortuary and along the highway to Miami and through walls again, those of the shaded house where his widow lay sleeping.

Sherlock used to wake her by pounding on her bedroom door and shouting her name till he heard her faint “Thank you, dear, I’m all right now.”

* 

At the Marylebone Road, Sherlock hails a cab. Caught up in the memory of Florida — the wretched heat; Mrs. Hudson’s fear; her husband’s voice, with its strange lighthearted emptiness that was audible even through the Plexiglas barrier in the prison visiting room where Sherlock, in character as Wife’s Twitty Relative from England, had come to interview him; the hypertrophied cockroaches euphemized as palmetto bugs — he doesn’t at first register the driver’s stare. He prims his lips at the cabbie in the rearview mirror; the cabbie looks away, casually, as if their glances had just happened to cross.

Insignificant. Irrelevant. Trivial. Insignificant, irrelevant, trivial. Trivial, irrelevant, insignificant. How many words can he find in insignificant? A game he used to play with long words during the interminable boredoms and dreads of primary school. Four letters minimum. Sign. Signing. Fanning. Insignia, cant, antic, scant, if I can’t — no, doesn’t meet criteria. Something flutters in Sherlock’s throat. Pulse, only your pulse you nitwit, a physiological response to nothing that matters at all. The transport taking matters into its own hands. Get it? Get it? His hands are so cold, he ought to have worn the leather gloves. It’s over twenty degrees out, don’t be stupid. His wallet shakes, the notes seem to flutter as he passes them forward, holding them just at the corners. The possibility of physical contact with the driver, inadvertent, as he gives over the notes makes his stomach lurch (vain, tent, intent, natter, tenner, train, inert — ). The driver appears to be embarrassed. He takes the notes carefully. “No change,” Sherlock says. He clears his throat: “No change.” All right. All right. He gets out of the cab and leans against the nearest wall, trying not to dry-heave. Solid wall behind him. All right. Better with the wall there. Only the wall behind him. No one is looking particularly: this is observable fact. He observes it repeatedly. All right.

He brings to mind the cabbie’s face: minute droop of the left eyelid, similarly of the left labial commissure. Sequelae probably of stroke. There come to Sherlock in rapid succession the images of other people, their visible and their secret illnesses, their exposed wounds and their hidden. Everyone he knows. Sarita Banerjee brings her hand to her mouth and presses, only for an instant, whenever,
for example, she sees a shattered headlamp, although her parents are three and a half decades dead. John’s shoulder is a complex of damage intentionally done and intentionally repaired, but even more interesting was that limp, its source as cryptic as its disappearance was swift. Lestrade’s wife cheats on him, then begs her way back, then cheats on him again. Lestrade experiences this in clichéd fashion, as a pain in his chest that he rubs at from time to time.

Here comes a woman in her twenties with a Zimmer frame, swinging her legs awkwardly out as she walks: a progressive ataxia. But she is thinking about something else, Sherlock can see from her face; she must be used to the frame, to the glances at her peculiar gait and away again. Across the road, another woman rubs her forefinger and thumb together at every third step; while Sherlock stands watching, she misses one and retraces her steps to the junction, where she starts over.

Detective Sergeant Sally Donovan. Callum Wolfe. Sherlock Holmes. Are he and they joined in haphazard, if not exactly accidental, siblinghood? The three of them.

Or all of them: the lame and the halt, the blind and the deaf and the maimed and the ones who hear voices and the ones who wash their hands repeatedly and the ones whose lovers betray them and the ones who kill their husbands because the most recent kick was the one that simply hurt too much to bear and the ones who had surgery and feel much better now and the ones who had surgery but are still getting messages from the amputated leg and the ones who rub their hands to limber them in cold weather and the ones who are no longer able to make sense of their bill from British Telecom or find the way out of Tesco and the ones …

… and especially, especially the ones in the back of the locked lorry, the ones burning with thirst, the ones who suffocated their infant who would not have lived much longer anyway — the infant who, Molly Hooper judged, had already been too weak to cry —

Sherlock leans against the wall, gasping, his hand over his eyes.

And the ones who have been raped.

A voice, male, accent Pakistani by way of North London, says from directly in front of him, “You okay, mate?” and without taking his hand away from his eyes Sherlock nods and says, “Yes, thank you for your concern; I’m perfectly well,” but the words come out all wrong: quiet and grateful; and the North London man of Pakistani origin says, “Okay then, you take care,” stupid trite hateful but Sherlock listens to the man’s footsteps as hard as he can, taking comfort from the sound, until he can no longer distinguish them.

Finally his breathing slows; when he looks up again, everything appears as it always has. He rubs at the corners of his eyes and steps away from the wall. Now there is air at his back. He takes a step. Another step. There are perhaps two hundred strides between his present position and the main entrance to the Yard. And no reporters, he thinks with grim pleasure. He can manage.

*  

Not one, not two, but three of John’s patients, back to back, reschedule, and none of his colleagues are out sick or on holiday. This means he actually has the time free, an extra hour tacked on to his lunch during which he can think over what the hell he’s to do about Sherlock. Because no matter how he lays out the facts, they add up to something untenable.

John’s in love with Sherlock, and Sherlock has as much as admitted that he’s in love with John.

John likes to be in charge of a willing sub, and he likes to deliver pain and humiliation in the service of delight. From an early age, Sherlock has wanted the very same things that John has to give: has wanted them so badly that he fell into the trap laid for him by James Moriarty. And ever since, he has
experienced sexual feeling as inextricable from Jim.

Sherlock *must* know by now, as a matter of reason, that John’s whip and John’s cuffs and John’s hands slapping him would mean something different to what Jim’s whip and cuffs and hands meant, but Sherlock believes himself to be Jim’s, and his near religious certainty shows no signs of breaking that John can see. Which means that, want each other though they may, Sherlock will not become John’s lover. And John has a breaking point. Unrequited love and desire are bad enough. Requited love and desire that can’t be acted on are a torment, even in the context of dinner, telly, and the occasional crime scene. Now John has essentially been living with Sherlock for the past week and a half.

Probably, he thinks, he ought to be ashamed of himself for responding sexually to Sherlock given the state his friend is in now. But Sherlock’s bottom forms the same alluring curve against the sofa when he lies on his side with his back to the room, dispirited and silent, as it does when he flings himself down in one of his semi-comic strops. The pattern of moles on his elegant neck has not changed. One day when he sat lost on thought with forefinger and middle finger pressed against his lips, John had what amounted to a vision of his own prick cushioned there. Whenever he passes behind Sherlock seated, he has to check the impulse to drag his hand through the curls at Sherlock’s nape and (gently, unrelentingly) pull.

Nothing could possibly have kept Sherlock from noticing but his preoccupation with his own misery.

If only the child Sherlock had not been prey to that cozener of wild things James Moriarty. John keeps his hands to himself. He is careful of where he lets his gaze rest and for how long. But the cost. He’s already growing irritable. The flickers of resentment will come next. And after that … ? John can’t bear the thought that the dearest friendship, the sweetest intimacy of his life should end in bitterness. So he ought to — ought to walk away from Sherlock now, oughtn’t he? Or — not now, but as soon as Sherlock has found his feet again.

Only, the thought makes John feel as if someone has taken a rib spreader to his chest. … But if he doesn’t go? An alternative possibility presents itself, with force: a badly timed drink, say. And — Sherlock needing some form of physical care. A bandage; stitches. The cleaning of grit out of a scrape. Nothing that hasn’t already happened, nothing that might not happen again, to bring John into physical contact with Sherlock when his own inhibitions are worn away. If — if he made a pass at Sherlock then, and Sherlock turned him down but never trusted him again … Worse, maybe, what if Sherlock said yes, not for his own reasons but to keep or appease John? That would be a nice revenge for Jim, if he were alive to see it: John and Sherlock colluding in a dynamic that finished the job he started.

But to leave Sherlock —

John spends the entirety of his extra hour sat on a park bench with his head in his hands. At the end of it he returns to work, having resolved nothing.

* *

The lobby of Scotland Yard is not quite a gauntlet, despite the recurrent glance / glance away, glance / glance away; it occurs to Sherlock that he had expected jeering. Some jeering, at least, as in the comments on his and John’s blogs … It is startling to realize that he has completely neglected to account for the fact that the Yard is above all a workplace, and that although large it is not anonymous. Any jeering will therefore take place in private.

Sherlock musters himself to inspect the demeanors of those whose gaze crosses his.
He reads embarrassment. Sympathy overlaid with embarrassment. The same. … The same. … Nothing — ah, that one pays no attention to the news. … Shamed arousal — that’s interesting. Not enough data to tell whether the arousal was elicited by Sherlock’s youth in the photographs or by the — what John would call the funhouse-mirror version of sadomasochism. Or perhaps the gear itself has through the man’s experience acquired the power to arouse, irrespective of context, and neither Sherlock’s age nor Jim’s cruelty is what appeals.

Glance / glance away. Glance / glance away.

It isn’t … comfortable. But it isn’t what he had — Well. Feared.

*  
Sally Donovan is on the phone when Sherlock comes in. She tilts her head in the direction of her second chair, which she has moved to her side of the desk, beside her, and pushes the keyboard and a file folder over to Sherlock when he sits down. On screen, the Major Investigation Database is open to the inquiry into Jim’s trafficking network. But Jim’s financial enterprises are incidental, as far as Sherlock is concerned at present; what he really wants to see are the photographs of Jim’s flat, and of brains-blown-out Jim. He opens the folder.

Jim shot himself straight through the right temple and he did not flinch as he pulled the trigger: the entry wound is neatly haloed by powder burn. The exit wound’s petaled edges are just discernible under their coat of blood and brains, which continues down Jim’s side to the gleaming wood floor. The gun rests on the floor just before Jim’s chair, between his sprawled legs. The front of his trousers is barely wet: Jim must have emptied his bladder just before he died. The vanity is not entirely alien to Sherlock.

But the close-ups of Jim’s wounds and the images documenting the precise position of the gun where it fell are too anonymous; they could have been taken at any of a number of violent aftermaths at which Sherlock has been present, or he might have seen them in Forensic Science International. What Sherlock wants is what’s specific to Jim, the way the barely wet trousers are specific to Jim. He sorts through the photographs for those that detail Jim’s face.

Here is one showing it full on. The entry and exit wounds are barely visible in this view, but Jim’s left eye can be seen to bulge slightly, pushed outward by the bullet’s passage, and both orbits are purpled. The general architecture of his features, however, is intact; Sherlock searches them for an expression but of course there is not one and to imagine there might be was irrational on his part. In his mind’s eye, therefore, he arranges the slack muscles into configurations he knew in life. The results are no more persuasive than an embalmer’s makeup. Flirty-moue Jim: dead. Coy Jim: dead. Contemptuous, lip-curled Jim: still dead. Sherlock looks again at the photograph that shows all of Jim, sprawled bloody in the chair with the gun between his feet, and thinks on Jim intentionally emptying his bladder, probably just before Sherlock entered the flat, perhaps again just after Sherlock left — Jim readying himself for the moment, soon to come, when he would no longer have agency. Attempting to preempt something that would otherwise happen without his volition, after he died.

Despite this attempt, the front of Jim’s trousers is wet. Not very wet, but wet. Jim didn’t want that to happen but after he was dead it happened anyway: Sherlock thinks this sentence through. The words in it are all simple ones and the fact thereby articulated is an obvious one, yet it loops in his mind’s ear, after he was dead it happened anyway; after he was dead it happened anyway. The wet trousers mean — they mean —

Jim is done affecting the world. Consequences may, will yet follow from what Jim did alive, but Jim himself will have no part in them. He’s done, Sherlock thinks in wonderment, and realizes that Donovan has finished her phone call and is watching him, leaning her chin on her bent arm. “He’s
dead,” Sherlock says, and blinks at his own stupidity.

Donovan’s eyebrows rise. “Really most sincerely dead,” she says. “You weren’t sure, were you.” It’s not a question.

“It seems absurd,” Sherlock hears himself admit.

“Uh-huh. Remind me, you were fourteen?”

Sherlock wants to protest the implication — “At fourteen, I was engaged in mathematical research, Sergeant, I wasn’t …” — but he draws a blank on what activity he might have been engaged in that would mark him an adolescent idiot such as might magnify a cunning cheap villain into a world-devouring monster, and, besides, the image has come to him again of a dark-haired boy, raw with longing in every part of himself. Sherlock closes his mouth and thinks of the wet spot on the front of Jim’s trousers. Jim should have put a small absorbent pad in his pants; someone might have laughed when it was discovered, Sherlock supposes, but it would have better served Jim’s purpose of making a good-looking forensic photograph.

Jim is done.

Donovan clears her throat: Sherlock has stood up without noticing. “You’re welcome,” she says, drily. “Now you’ve had a nice visit with me, you might look in on Greg. He’s been worried.”

“Oh.” He had thought of phoning Lestrade this morning, true, but not to express gratitude, not even to reassure the DI that he is — all right, if “all right” is an accurate label for his frame of mind. Jim is done. But while he was alive he accomplished much. A lorry, a case of water bottles, one bottle with the label missing —

He should thank Lestrade. If not for Lestrade, the people who looked at him in the lobby would almost all have seen Jim’s photos of him, instead of hearing a whispered and partial description or two. John would surely approve of Sherlock’s thanking Lestrade.

Lestrade, of course, has seen the photos: all of them. Sherlock wishes urgently that he had worn his coat, warm day or no warm day.

John is not available to consult, because he is at work.

Sherlock is not yet certain of this apparent rapprochement with Donovan. But there was that email from Dr. Banerjee, asserting that he, Sherlock, has friends. And John said something, more than a year ago now, when Sherlock thought Lestrade was warning John to keep clear of him, something about Lestrade’s opinion of Sherlock, that he thought of Sherlock in favorable terms not only with respect to his utility to the Met. Though that utility might account for Lestrade’s efforts to limit the photos’ spread, mightn’t it? He would not wish to see Sherlock’s effectiveness compromised.

Very small and already weak —

Sherlock pushes the thought away.

Lestrade has spoken angry words to Sherlock many times but he has never baited Sherlock.

Sherlock’s heart continues high and fast. He becomes aware that he has stood, blinking, in front of Donovan’s desk for some time — she has turned her attention away from him and back to her work. Writing up case notes, and she’s not pleased with the quality of the forensics —

“You left him,” Sherlock says.
Donovan doesn’t bother to pretend she doesn’t know what he’s talking about. “We’re not discussing it, Holmes.”

Donovan has been kind to Sherlock. Sherlock should do something for her. What what what. Probably she is sorry about the end of the affair with Anderson, even though she instigated the end: people are unreasonable, that way. “You’re clever,” he tries. “Well, clever for the Met, not that that’s setting a high bar, but much cleverer than Anderson, but it was obvious you thought you couldn’t do any better, but you can, I wouldn’t advise setting your cap for Lestrade, he’s in far too much emotional turmoil over his wife besides being your boss, but there’s that fellow Dimmock, he’s not too stupid and he fancies you, I saw him at a crime scene looking.”

Donovan puts her hand over her mouth.

“All, get Lestrade to draw to your work the attention of someone other than his boss. Melville’s an atavism, as you suspect; he has barely reconciled himself to the existence of blacks and he gets his back up when women speak their minds, which of course you do with great frequency and an entire lack of tact, so he’s oblivious to your merits and if it’s left up to him your career will never go anywhere.”

*There.* Sherlock nods once and is off.

“Can’t accuse you of pussyfooting around sensitive topics,” Donovan tells the air; “’entire lack of tact,’ did you say?,” but she is smiling.

Lestrade is bent over his paperwork, hands clutched in his hair, muttering. He doesn’t hear Sherlock’s arrival, so Sherlock continues to watch him silently. Excepting Sarita (and Mycroft), Lestrade is the person who has known him longest — strange to consider this, when he has never thought of Lestrade as a friend. What does Lestrade feel toward him? Sherlock prods at this mystery, weighs Donovan’s “He’s been worried,” in which statement her tone suggested that Lestrade felt concern of a sort not fitted to —

Oh, the workings of an engine, say, or of one’s auxiliary hard drive.

“It’s likely,” Sherlock begins.

Lestrade startles.

Sherlock has the rest of his sentence ready and exact: “… that within a few years I shall require forearm crutches; that is to say, my mobility, and thus my usefulness in investigations, will be compromised” — he has all this in mind, but to marshal lips, tongue, breath for speech has suddenly become impossible. Number plate AP13LMX, issued in Norwich, 2013, written in — He could fall down, he feels. It is not at all clear what to do about his hands or what expression it would be best to assume. Untidy scrawl, dried and brown. An inventory of his facial muscles suggests that his present expression is one consistent with discomposure.

“Chair, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sits.

Lestrade studies him and after a moment demonstrates that Sherlock is not the only one present with deductive skills: “First time out, since?”

He went outdoors yesterday, to call back to 221B the boy Callum. Does that count? Probably. Or
not? He finds that, at least, he can speak again: “As near as makes no difference,” he says.

Lestrade takes a mug off the shelf behind him. “Wait a tick.”

Though there’s no puzzle here, Sherlock out of habit maps the DI’s footsteps against the geography of the hallway. *Clomp clomp clomp* as far as the water fountain; extended pause, with running water; *clomp clomp clomp* return. Lestrade sets the filled mug on his desk where Sherlock can reach it, and hands over several pieces of kitchen roll, folded and wet.

*(Callum Wolfe honking in the sitting room.*) But Sherlock is not crying. He takes the kitchen roll and looks at it.

“For your forehead, you know? Case you’re a bit lightheaded or whatever.”

Sherlock doesn’t think he’s lightheaded but the damp coolness is pleasant in his hand so he puts the kitchen roll to his forehead. Then he picks up the mug and drinks. It seems to him that he ought now to say something, perhaps about Lestrade’s nursing skills, in any case something to establish that Lestrade is transparent to him (*empty water bottles*); in fact, it’s obvious that Lestrade has had a difficult week, has been sleeping poorly, has almost certainly rowed with his wife … Sherlock stutters to a halt. He is still holding the kitchen roll to his forehead; perhaps he should put it down now? What is the normal length of time for holding damp kitchen roll to one’s forehead?

“Give it here.” Lestrade takes the roll from Sherlock’s hand and bins it.

*(One label missing.*) Sherlock says: “That first time I was arrested. The facts of the case met criteria for a charge of trafficking to be laid. You recommended against it. I’ve never understood why.”

This is not what he was expecting to say — in fact, since he opened his mouth in Donovan’s office and the words “He’s dead” emerged, he seems to have had no idea of what he can expect to find himself saying. *There was a space between the interior handle of the door and the door itself and the note was wedged into that space. He had taken it out carefully, using tweezers —*

Sherlock makes himself stop rubbing his right palm against the outside of his leg. People pass and re-pass Lestrade’s office. There are voices, ringtones, doors being opened and closed. Someone pauses by the same water fountain Lestrade visited earlier. Sound of running water. *(One bottle with the label missing.)*

“Yeah, there’re times when I don’t understand it either, mainly when you’re being even more of an arse than usual. What was it, sixty grams? No — ”

“Eighty,” Sherlock supplies.

“Right, and a good chunk of it was pure. That lab you had going. Why did I recommend … ? Ah, I dunno. As far as the facts went, it was pretty clear you weren’t who the trafficking laws were after. You’d no money to speak of, and there was a bloke came in after you’d been taken off, wanting to know when his stash would be cleaned up and ready for him. He helped me make the argument to myself. But there was another bit … You won’t like this, mind you.”

Sherlock presses his lips together.

“You were two things at once. A posh bastard, that was one half of you, like even with the cuffs on you could crook your pinky and the world would stop and ask How may I help you, sir.”

Lestrade’s Snooty Headwaiter accent is atrocious.
“But then the other half of you. Like you couldn’t remember the last time anybody had done you a kindness — not ‘cause you were posh but just as one person to another — and you didn’t expect it ever to happen, either. It bothered me.”

Sherlock dredges up a reserve of scorn: “Pity,” he says.

“I guess. Is it so bad?”

_I have no idea_, Sherlock doesn’t say. He offers an irresolute movement of his head, yes/no. A week and a half ago he would have said he well understood the workings of the world. Now he is confused and tired and upended. _Very small and already weak_. He has still not spoken with Lestrade about his imminent cripplehood or even about Jim’s emails. Lestrade doesn’t appear to be thinking about the emails, but — Sherlock should prod at this, push Lestrade into revealing himself — but Lestrade went to the Director of Public Prosecutions to get the photos deleted from the Yard’s servers — but there was the other thing, the thing that no one knew, the detail that Sherlock had omitted from his statement —

(Jim raises his eyebrow, and Sherlock says, “Did you pick that group because you had reason to think one of them was clever enough to leave me something to work with?” — and again, again, again Jim golf-claps, one two three four, and according to Molly the infant would have been too weak by then to cry anyway —)

Sherlock says, “Thank you. For getting the email deleted. That was — Thank you, I’m sorry, I must go —”

*  

John is about to see his 15:00 patient when Marjory the receptionist knocks loud and fast on his office door and simultaneously opens it. “Dr. Watson, it’s your friend — the one who, you know —”

“Dammit,” John begins, and bites his tongue to keep himself from saying _He’s a bloody crime victim, Marjory, he’s not the one who did anything to be ashamed of_, because in the first place it won’t do any good to upbraid her for being embarrassed and in the second place he is also worried for Sherlock and, reasonably or not, irritated with him for showing up at the clinic, when work is the only time John can more or less keep from perseverating on the thought of what is to become of them, and what is the point of taking any of that out on Marjory?

Anyway, the irritation dwindles to nothing as soon as John steps into the waiting room.

Sherlock is leaning against the wall, his hands pressed against the fronts of his legs, his eyes shut; he breathes with the studied rhythm of someone fending off a panic attack. John comes to stand in front of him, at an angle so as not to crowd him, and speaks his name twice before Sherlock turns toward John. His gaze is blank. His expression shapes itself into the look he wears when he is about to make a pronouncement of some sort, and his lips open, but he says nothing.

John has never seen him like this, not even the morning after Guildford when Sherlock threw him out, not even the night Jim killed himself and not even any of the silent, stupefied days that followed. “Easy,” he murmurs, and “Hush now,”; carefully, tentatively, he rests a hand on Sherlock’s forearm and uses it to guide his friend — “Come on now, come with me, we can go in my office, it’s quiet there, hush now, shh, it’s okay …”

He gentles Sherlock into a chair and brings his own near so he can hold Sherlock’s hand, but in the interval Sherlock has brought up his knees and drawn his arms around them. He has also begun to
speak — at first John can’t make out what he’s saying, but gradually his speech gathers force and speed:

“… didn’t work it out, which one of them, it should have been possible if I had examined their clothes, that’s what the one who did it would likely have used, a wadded-up garment, so there should have been — ”

“Sherlock — ”

“ — there should have been mucus, saliva, some blood even, and then I could know which of them, was it the mother or the father, one of the other women was probably an aunt, maybe only someone more distant could have brought himself to do it, or herself, hard to say whether most men or most women would find it harder to steel themselves — ”

“Jesus, Sherlock — ”

“ — of course she was so small and already weak, so it would have taken hardly any time, John, even a child could have managed it, and Jim did that because of me, arranged for the lorry to be sealed and abandoned, do you understand now?, because I’m the one who engineered his expulsion from the doctoral program, you see, that was my doing — ”

“Oh, no, no — ”

“ — and I could have, I could have just gone on, but I didn’t, I got rid of him, and the people, John, and she was so small, you didn’t see her in the morgue, and it was all because of me — ”

“Oh, God,” John says, “oh, God, you can’t think that,” and he wraps himself around Sherlock as much as he can with Sherlock in the narrow chair and abruptly the stream of words dries up and Sherlock convulses in John’s arms and sobs, sobs, sobs.

Chapter End Notes

“Major Investigation Database”: Well, Sergeant Donovan can’t use the Home Office Large Major Enquiry System, right? What with him sitting in her office, and all. Also? You would not believe what I went through trying to come up with a halfway plausible alternative to HOLMES that didn’t produce a really embarrassing acronym.

I did some research into the appearance of fatal gunshot wounds to the head; I won’t post links here, but many informative images can be found on documentingreality.com.

Nonspoilery spoiler: Jim's really dead, okay? Not being the showrunners, I'm not fucking with your heads. :^)
Your heart taking root in your body

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the storm, Sherlock takes inventory.

Chapter Notes

... he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you’ve discovered something you don’t even have a name for.

— Richard Siken, "You Are Jeff"

Yes, the chapter count went up, because my arithmetic skills are that feeble.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sherlock’s weeping subsides, he feels heavy and mostly warm, which, he realizes, is because at some point John has taken his cardigan off and laid it over him. Also at some point Sherlock slid out of the chair and John came down too, apparently bearing a box of tissues, many of which now litter the tile in a rough semicircle around them, like a skirt around a Christmas tree. Sherlock’s head is against John’s shoulder, and John’s shirt is wet where Sherlock has wept against it.

Sherlock starts to push himself upright; but John says, “No,” firmly, and pulls him back against himself.

“You had a patient scheduled,” Sherlock points out.

“I think Marjory’s capable of working out that he needs to be seen by someone else.”

“Yes, that’s what happens when one person weeps into another person’s shirt. Shush.”

*

In the wake of the storm, Sherlock takes inventory. What he feels: Lassitude. A pain in his throat, partly physical (raw; hoarse), partly … not (a distant ache, like a bruise through cotton wool). He should get up, he thinks, but instead in the past few moments he has left his position against John’s shoulder and turned his body so that he is stretched along the floor, with his head resting against John’s thigh in such a way that he can press his face into the corner made by John’s upright torso and outstretched leg. John’s much-laundered cotton twill trousers are soft against Sherlock’s face; if he angles his neck just so, he can pick up the faint, warm, genital smell. Warmth travels from John’s muscle and bone and blood. John’s right hand rests against Sherlock’s shoulder, the thumb circling in
time with John’s heart. *Flub-dub, circle; flub-dub, circle.* John’s cardigan got twisted around Sherlock when he turned his face toward John and has lumped under his right arm, annoying but not annoying enough to do anything about. Sherlock’s side and his leg are cold where they touch the floor, but he’s aware of this distantly, the same way he’s aware of the ache in his throat. John’s arse is better padded than Sherlock’s side, so perhaps he is not feeling the chill of the floor so much. Sherlock considers the effort he would have to make to reassemble his expression into one fit to shield himself with, and lets the notion go. Everything has already happened. In a few moments, or perhaps it will take as long as several minutes, John will stir, restless because his leg has fallen asleep or because he needs a piss, and then Sherlock can look at him and know the outcome of this absurd emotional collapse. He pauses on the thought.

Whatever happened to him today will not drive John away; Sherlock is reasonably confident of this. The thought brings with it an internal lightening — only that, because he’s far too weary for exhilaration.

“You can’t really believe that,” John says. The quiet in his office is made quieter by contrast with the sounds from the corridor, as the other staffers close up for the night. “What you said. That you’re at fault?”

Does he? He must, or he wouldn’t have said so. At length. Sherlock inhales deeply. Tension accumulates in him and is released. The movement of John’s thumb on his shoulder doesn’t falter. John knows Sherlock well enough to know that if he doesn’t answer, that’s not because he’s forgotten the question.

“Yes,” Sherlock says. “I do. Or, if I turn the prism a few degrees, no. No, because of course Jim was — let’s say ‘formed,’ before he met me, else he’d not have — ”

It comes as a surprise that he is still so reluctant to speak the words that should follow — reluctant to speak them just now, anyway. The emotion that would have lashed them from him has spent itself, spent him. On to the next point, then: “He wouldn’t have become a — oh, a mild-mannered professor of mathematics. A philanthropist. I’m well aware I didn’t kill the people in the lorry. But Jim chose his particular victims for convenience’ sake, because they fell into his path, and they fell into his path because I shifted it when I inserted those plagiarisms into his thesis.”

“But — ”

Sherlock raises one hand from where he has tucked it against his breast, and lets it drop again. “You doubt that it was so reprehensible for me to take that revenge, given my age and the … offense against me. Some might say I should have gone to the police. You thought to ask me about that possibility, once.”

John makes air hiss between his tongue and the backs of his teeth.

“Of course one can just hear the officer taking my statement.” Sherlock’s voice is almost sleepy. “And you went to his flat voluntarily? How many times was that? Remind me, Sherlock, did you have orgasms?” I suppose there might have been a prosecution for sexual activity with a child, with a result similar to the one I obtained, except that I would have been made over and over to recount details of the —”

“Don’t say ‘affair.’”

Against John’s leg, Sherlock sighs. “‘Experience,’ then, will that do?”

“Better,” John says. “Just — so it doesn’t sound like a dirty weekend in Paris.”
Something in his voice; now Sherlock does sit up, to study his friend’s expression.

*Of course.* He shifts away. “I have been grossly unfair to you,” he says.

John flushes. “I’ve been trying — ”

“I’m aware.”

They look at each other for a long moment in silence before Sherlock leans forward and, swift as a bird that brushes a bough without alighting, kisses John’s mouth. Before John — who draws back, shocked — has a chance to speak, Sherlock says:

“I’m so bloody sick and tired of James Moriarty.”

The sentence hangs in the air. Pulling himself up by the edge of John’s desk, Sherlock gets to his feet. John clambers up and begins to clear the tissues from the floor; after a moment, Sherlock, frowning, follows suit. When they have binned the last few John speaks:

“You understand I’ve got no idea what to do.”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you. I know that, John.”

“I don’t know what you should or shouldn’t do. I don’t — how can I even offer an opinion, when this whole mess between us is to do with you having been, I dunno, weaseled into something you weren’t ready for? But — And Jesus, how can I even talk about this with you now, when you’ve just bloody collapsed in my office because these past weeks — ” John makes some indeterminate hand motions and ends up pinching the bridge of his nose, shaking his head.

Sherlock says: “The mess between us. But it’s all the same mess. My — ‘experience’ was the word we decided on, wasn’t it? — my experience with Jim. Whatever responsibility I bear for his later trajectory. His attempt to blackmail me into killing him. The … internal obstacles to my being what I would wish to be, to you.”

He looks carefully at John — message received — and continues: “All of it one immense clump of cause-effect-cause. You want to describe yourself as selfish, perhaps, because this conversation has drawn toward the piece of the clump that most directly involves you. All right. But it *is* all one clump. And if we’re calling you selfish, I think we had better call me selfish as well. I did kiss you.”

John laughs a little. “You did.”

“You were intending to come back to Baker Street tonight, I think.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Don’t. I’m all right, only I ought to be alone, to collect myself. And I think — I think you might need to collect yourself, as well. But.” He swallows. “Before I go. Will you kiss me, please. And make me know it’s you.”

“Now?”

“Why not?” Sherlock is looking directly at John, his eyes still red, but with something quiet and calm in his face that John thinks he has not seen before. “I realize — This week has upended some of my assumptions. Today. Well. I have felt a great many things.” His small real tentative smile. “To a sometimes alarming extent. But you understand, don’t you, that my wanting you is a constant? And at the moment I’m far too tired to be afraid of anything. So, yes, kiss me, please. If, that is, you
would like to.”

Would John like to, considering how this experiment went last time?

Right hand against Sherlock’s left clavicle, left hand against Sherlock’s right clavicle, John presses him backward one step, two, till Sherlock is just against the wall; takes Sherlock’s right hand and sets it, palm against the wall, beside Sherlock’s right hip; arranges his left hand beside his left hip; rests his own left hand on Sherlock’s sternum, exerting the barest force. “All right?”

Sherlock’s eyes have closed. He nods.

“Look at me, then, and say it.”

Open-eyed: “Yes.”

“Okay.” John’s right hand along Sherlock’s jaw; John’s left hand sunk in the curls at the back of Sherlock’s neck. He draws Sherlock’s mouth to his, and he kisses him.

John brings to this kiss not only all his pent-up desire and all his affection but also all his frustration, his irritability, his worry for Sherlock’s well-being, his anxiety about whether this will work, whether Sherlock will ever be rid of the spider Jim, his troubled reflections about their future — so, for all his care, he’s distracted, and somewhat awkward. Make me know it’s you, he hears Sherlock say, and he thinks he has probably failed.

He hasn’t. Sherlock is enervated by the hour and the week and the months just past, that’s true. Yet the lightening he felt earlier gathers itself into an exhausted joy. The kiss bears with it all of John, and it is all John. Something happens inside Sherlock that feels a bit like nitrous oxide coming on; pressure gathers between his legs. He wants — he wants to lay his neck bare. He wants to open. He wants; he wants; he wants.

Jim doesn’t say a word. The one kissing Sherlock is John.

* 

Back at Baker Street: Sherlock knows he should sleep, and he knows John would be frowning at him with folded arms for not doing so, but such a day, ending in such a kiss, has left him with a second wind of not unpleasantly jittering energy. Also, he has been thinking uncomfortably of Sarita, who deserves better than to hear of him at second hand and who has been getting nothing but second hand for nearly two weeks now.

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

To begin with, thank you.

Having said that, I find myself at something of a loss for how to continue. Rather, I know what I ought to tell you, but—

I am inclined to write simply that you needn’t worry for me, and then to inquire after the progress of your present researches. (I began to write “current researches,” but
have thought better of it.)

Enough prevarication, when you have been dear to me for so many years, and when I, for so many years, believed you to be the only person to whom I might be dear in turn.

I seem to have been mistaken. That is, there are others who have at least some fellow-feeling with me. And John

I should say much more, but that you need not worry for me, that much at least is true. I am in better case than I would have expected.

Thank you for the constancy of your friendship.

Thank you for the constancy of

Thank you for

Thank you for the constancy of your friendship.

[deleted]

*

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

You see, there may be

I may

I have reason to hope that John and I may be able to come to a mutually satisfying arrangement after all. I am not certain

[deleted]

*

From: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

To: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

Round and round, I have written and deleted, written and deleted, prevaricating when I said I would not. I mean that for years you have insisted that I have friends, and for years I have scoffed at the notion.

Perhaps you are right. I hesitate to believe it.

I ascribed Mrs. Hudson’s kindness to gratitude, Detective Inspector Lestrade’s civility to
my usefulness to him, neither to any personal attachment to me. The exception that is
John, I more or less discounted as anomalous.

Recently I have been shown generosity, both public and private, that on the basis of past
experience I did not believe I had reason to anticipate. I suspect that, in making his plans
for me, Jim also did not anticipate it. The irony amuses.

There are things I have not told you about what passed between myself and Jim, which
have to do with the nature of my early sexual imaginings and with his expulsion from
UCL. The former, I prefer to discuss with you in person or perhaps not at all. With
respect to the latter, you should know that I engineered the expulsion, by making it
appear that he had plagiarized his doctoral dissertation; he had not. He had a certain
academic or intellectual pride. Whether it amounted to integrity is a question to which I
have no answer. In any case I humiliated him and destroyed his career, so that when he
found me in the public eye he decided to take his revenge.

At the time it occurred, John described to you the case of the Syrian refugees, he tells
me, so I need not relate it.

What he did not know then, but knows now, is that Jim arranged for the refugees to be
sealed in the lorry and abandoned, specifically to produce a crime scene where he might
find me so as to taunt me. Among the dead, as you know, there was an infant.

There is also the boy Jim kidnapped as bait and a puzzle for me.

John argues that I should not regard the deaths of the refugees or the boy’s kidnapping
as a consequence of my actions. I must agree that had I gone to the police, and had Jim
by some extraordinary chance been convicted of a sexual offense against me, his
academic career would have been forfeit just as it was forfeit to my private reprisal.
Nevertheless, it remains difficult to perceive these particular crimes as entirely
unconnected with my own acts.

Here, Sherlock breaks off and clicks “Cancel.”

“Are you sure?” the dialogue box inquires. “This email and all of its contents will be lost.”

He hovers; hovers; clicks “Save draft.” Reopens the email.

But I wanted to tell you about John.

He has been staying at Baker Street, as you know. Tonight I sent him home for the first
time since what I suppose I may call “that night,” since it is absurd to imagine that you
would not understand the allusion. Anyway, I sent him home. He finds it painful to be
in my presence so much without the option of sexual contact. He believed me oblivious
to his distress, but one could hardly miss the direction of his gaze, the dilation of his
pupils, the occasional look of pain when he forgets to school his expression, and so on. I
want
to make him happy. I have not

For years, it has seemed to me

You said once that you believed John to be equal to any task, if the prize to be won was me. Whether I am a prize seems doubtful, but such as the prize is I would give it to him if I could. Perhaps

For the first time it seems (just barely) possible that I can. But how long am I to ask him to wait in patience while I attempt to mend well enough to present myself to him — realistically, I might say? And if I ask him to wait, and he does wait, and I then prove myself unequal to the task of mending?

The warmth and constancy of your friendship have sustained me through times when much else in my life seemed meager. Here has been another such passage. Thank you.

Please do apprise me of the status of your current researches.

Sherlock

[ sent ]

*  

On R/V Atlantis in the north Pacific, Dr. Sarita Banerjee sits down with her afternoon espresso to contemplate some data on body temperature regulation in the fauna that live off the microbes of the Juan de Fuca hydrothermal vents. After an hour of muttering over statistics, she straightens up, cracks her back, and opens her email. A moment later, she whoops.

From: saritabanerjee@atlantis.whoi.edu

To: sholmes@scienceofdeduction.uk.com

It’s a relief to hear from you direct and I won’t pretend otherwise, you bastard; I’ve been worried sick. If you knew any statistical methods at all I would put you to work on my data concerning temperature regulation in the fauna of hydrothermal vent ecosystems, as penance for forcing me to rely on John these past days for reports on your state of mind. And don’t think I missed that inelegant pun.

It is curious, is it not, that circumstances conspired to give you a view of human behavior so exactly like James Moriarty’s? That view is not wrong, exactly, but it’s incomplete; it neglects to account for you yourself, for example, or, as you say, for the people whose generosity you’re now experiencing.
You and Jim: I shall be entirely unscientific and say that he put a curse on you, the curse being that you have been unable for years to distinguish yourself from what he sought to make of you. Sought to make of you, and failed utterly. I suppose that one could identify features common to you and Jim: intelligence, for example. But even in that respect it is as if one applied the same label to two compounds with similar structures but radically different properties, like certain enantiomers.

There, back to a scientific metaphor. Much more comfortable territory.

This notion of your being responsible in any way for Jim’s crimes is a nonsense and you should not entertain it. Consider the inverse case, that you had taken no action against Jim and he went about his merry way. Would you then hold yourself responsible for the fates of those he damaged in that alternative universe? What am I saying, you probably would. Perhaps self-blame is less painful than helplessness, but it does not always entail a more realistic view of one’s condition.

Take what I say to heart. Everyone who loves you is not therefore an idiot — at least, not in that respect.

I have news of my own. Now that the Supreme Court here has struck down certain repugnant statutes, Władek is once more pressing his suit; and, now that the law has changed, I have no reason to continue to refuse him. I shall not continue to refuse him. You and your John are not invited to attend the festivities: you are under orders to do so. I’m short a bridesmaid. Whether you wear pink tulle is, of course, entirely up to you.

*  

SH to JW, 23:40

*I should like to repeat that experiment, if you are amenable.* SH

JW to SH, 23:44

*i think you know i’m amenable. but why arent you asleep.*

SH to JW, 23:46

*Sleep is boring.* SH

SH to JW, 23:48

*Do you understand what I meant when I told you I knew it was you?* SH

JW to SH, 23:54

*i think so, yes. i’m glad.*

JW to SH: 23:55

*more than glad*

SH to JW, 00:05

*Dinner at Angelo’s, 19:00 tomorrow?* SH

JW to SH, 00:06
Yes. YES.

SH to JW, 00:08

Good night, then. SH

JW to SH, 00:10

good night

Chapter End Notes

Hydrothermal vents: Oh, look, temperature regulation in the fish *Thermarces andersoni* (I swear I’m not making that up), which lives near hydrothermal vents, is apparently old news.

Fun fact from my researches: the water shooting out of these things is hot enough to melt lead.
Blossom by blossom

Chapter Summary

Sex, yo.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They should, theoretically, be talking over every step. That should, theoretically, be the only wise approach to a sexual relationship between people who’ve gotten into terrible trouble by not Telling All.

Then again, maybe they’ve finally Told Enough to Be Going On With.

Da capo, then, but with variations, because they know where the music went wrong the first time.

Takeaway and telly are put aside for now. By tacit agreement, they meet for supper twice a week, always at a sit-down restaurant, always someplace quiet where the management don’t mind their lingering. They always take a table far from the door.

(“We’re dating, then?” “So it would appear.”) (Not all tacit, then.)

Over dinner, they touch. Their hands brush as Sherlock passes John the salt; they lean together over the menu, experiencing the sensation of bone and muscle and fabric against bone and muscle and fabric (experiencing this, for the first time, as mutually understood, mutually wished-for — as a beginning, rather than as a helpless turn in a maze that permits no further progress). John lays his hand, palm flat, between Sherlock’s shoulder blades, only for a moment, in passing; Sherlock traces his knuckles, once, lightly, over John’s hand where it rests on the table.

After dinner, John sees Sherlock home. Sherlock should find this tiresome — shouldn’t he? And trite: the assumption of the “masculine” role along with the — not yet fully realized — sexually dominant one. It should annoy him, this seeming conflation of the submissive and the received feminine, for the intellectual carelessness it enacts if for no other reason.

It doesn’t annoy him at all, and an embarrassingly large number of dates (three) passes before he works out why. Sherlock used to go to Jim and then afterward turn home by himself, feeling filthy and lonely and cold; John sees Sherlock safe home. Safe home. The lesson in the structure of these evenings, repeated over and over, is the lesson of care. I will return you to yourself. Always, I will see you safe home.

*

At Baker Street, after every date, John kisses Sherlock goodnight.

The doorsill of 221B is too shallow for two grown men, even if the men stand as close to each other as is physically possible, besides which one sharp-eyed passerby with a smartphone would do to bring the hounds back on Sherlock’s trace. The kisses goodnight, therefore, take place in the stairwell outside Mrs. Hudson’s door.
John kisses Sherlock roughly, or gently, always unchastely, always with utmost care.

That first long kiss in John’s office when Sherlock was too exhausted to feel fear, that was a beginning, but fear isn’t so easily banished and there’s a night when Sherlock is leaning against the wall with one of John’s hands on his arse, the other wound tight in the hair at his nape — Oh, Sherlock realizes, John favors that, and resolves never to cut his hair too short for grabbing — and their hips are grinding together, when Sherlock hears a noise coming out of his throat and then —

*Look at you, you’d crawl for him.*

*Just gagging for it, aren’t you?*

But John’s advantaged by knowing what the trouble is and Sherlock is advantaged by the memory of their conversation in the hospital and of the time when John was sewing up his arm and Sherlock said *Stop* and John stopped. He still doesn’t quite believe in this, either his own ability to say it or in John’s willingness to defer to him; it’s like a bridge swaying over a gorge, he can see it, he has crossed it before and it has held him, but he has to cross it again and again to feel certain of it, and he needs the bridge and he wonders whether this time it might not give way. He wrenches his face away. “Stop. *Stop.*”

John gasps and pulls back fast, letting go altogether. Jim’s voice goes silent. Sherlock opens his eyes; draws in a long breath and lets it out slowly; finds John’s hand, and takes it; moves close to set his face against John’s neck, just where the skin meets his shirt collar; and inhales. There comes the vibration of John’s voice saying “Okay?,” meaningless and soothing. Sherlock nods into John’s shoulder and breathes in his smell: clean warm skin layered with the day’s sweat, and faintly, from his hands, antiseptic, with a note of powder from the kind of exam gloves he prefers; all over him, Nivea soap, which John uses, thinking it a touch indulgent, because a colleague told him it was good for hands dry from washing repeatedly through the day.

The scent of John’s hair varies every few months, because he buys whatever’s own-brand and on sale at Boots (at present: chamomile and lemon balm and, Sherlock has to concede, not bad at all).

“Jim turned up in your head?”

“Mm.” Jim’s voice always seems to come from a specific physical location in the interior space of Sherlock’s awareness; he turns his focus there now, finds nothing. “And buggered off again. ... John: More.”

John looks at him, doubtful.

Sherlock pushes his groin against John’s leg. “Yes. I do mean it.” What’s different? Yes — this is the first time Sherlock can remember managing to oust that voice. He feels a lick of triumph. *Get out, you parasite. Go.*

John takes Sherlock’s face in his hands, rests his mouth against Sherlock’s. “Just a little, then. Just a little.”

The movement of John’s lips against Sherlock’s is annoying, in that it is not enough. Prickles of damp have collected along Sherlock’s neck; he wants to throw his head back; the fabric of his clothes is irritating the skin of his thighs and chest. “John,” he says, “I want — something.”

They balance on the moment while John takes this in. Sherlock realizes with a pang that memories of Sherlock’s behavior must play something like the same role for John as the memory of Jim’s voice does for Sherlock. This is simply impermissible. He takes a breath and looks straight into John’s
eyes. “John. It’s all right. I’m sure.”

“Okay,” John says, “okay then: hands behind your back, please,” and Sherlock feels the words in his own throat.

Yes, yes, yes. What’s the difference between panic and joy? This is.

He clasps his hands behind his back, obedient.

John covers Sherlock’s mouth with his right hand and kisses Sherlock’s neck, only his neck, nipping at the soft just-salty skin behind Sherlock’s earlobes, nipping under the angle of his jaw. Each side in turn, and then the juncture of neck and shoulder. Sherlock arching his neck to bare himself more fully. John’s hand, over his mouth, gentle, moving with him.

John uncovers Sherlock’s mouth. (“Still yes?” “Please. Yes.”) Strokes his thumb between Sherlock’s lips. Reaches down and clasps Sherlock’s ribcage between his hands, exerting enough pressure to let Sherlock know that he can hold Sherlock there if Sherlock bucks or twists; and then he rises on tiptoe and sets his mouth against Sherlock’s and kisses him like that.

(Sherlock held in place by his own obedience and the pressure of John’s hands.)

Sherlock must make a noise, or shift his hips: he can feel John smiling into his mouth; John presses the kiss just a little longer, long enough for Sherlock’s heart to kick, for an impatient heat to set up between his legs; then breaks away with a barely voiced “Oh, God,” against Sherlock’s shoulder. He relaxes his grip and strokes down Sherlock’s side to his hips. “Still all right?”

Sherlock takes up this question in detail. Physically, he is somewhat uncomfortable, because (a) he settled his wrists below the curve of his back, so that his hands are pressed into the wall; (b) he’s half hard in his trousers; (c) a drop of sweat has run partway down the left side of his neck and is tickling him there. Otherwise, though — with respect to emotion (which is the label we apply to the experience of certain physiological processes, he reminds himself, so the distinction between physical sensation and emotion is false; nevertheless: emotionally) — he feels ... wonderful. Something fizzes in his chest; John’s hands are light but steady on his hips; the image comes to him of a ship at anchor, rocking, tugged by wave and breeze, held safe.

“Yes,” he says, “I’m fine,” and thinks: Soon now. He looks down at John: bulge in trousers; grin. “You’re pleased with yourself.” In fact, Sherlock is smiling back. As though they’re getting away with something.

“Well spotted.” John kisses him again, lightly this time. “I thought I might’ve pushed too much.”

Sherlock shakes his head; brings his hands out from behind his back and rests them, tentatively, on John’s back; then less tentatively, so that he can feel John’s respirations both against his own chest and under his hands. John’s prick is hard against his thigh. I could invite him up now. Another word comes to him:

Everything.

Everything.

Both their smiles are idiotic, really. Sherlock doesn’t mind.

John clears his throat. “Ehm ... this seems like a good time to call it a night, yeah?”

(Disappointment. But probably John is right, this has been a remarkably successful experiment, they
should attempt to pursue it further next time.) “All right.”


“Sit in the loo? Why on earth would you — ”

The penny drops.

“Oh! Sustained sexual arousal is causing you discomfort, and you want to masturbate.”

John’s hands cover his face. “Mrs. Hudson, Sherlock!” he hisses from behind them, and emits a wheeze of stifled laughter.

“Not the loo,” Sherlock hears himself say. (More quietly, though.) “I want to watch.”

John drops his hands, neither embarrassed now, nor laughing.

“And tell me,” Sherlock continues. “What you’d do. If you were touching me.” His temples, his ears, his cheekbones are burning. The two of them stare at each other in the dim hallway.

John nods. “Upstairs, then.”

*

There’s a bit of a song-and-dance about getting situated. Is this a social occasion? Sherlock thinks frantically of tea, of biscuits, of what he should put the biscuits on, of tissues, of lube, which he doesn’t have because he has been avoiding sexual imagination as much as possible for twenty years; “Lotion?” John asks, yes yes, of course Sherlock has lotion, why didn’t he think of that?, if he didn’t have lotion his hands would be a cracked bleeding mess, as often as he has to wash them, especially when working with biological specimens, although of course he gloves, anyway it’s quite a good lotion; oh, and there’s some glycerine left over from an explosives experiment —

John is twinkling at him. Sherlock claps his mouth shut and gives John the tube of lotion.

“Good, now put the plate down.”

Sherlock puts the plate down.

“How do you want me?” The question is apparently sincere.

“Aren’t you the one who’s meant to — And you’ve lost your erection,” Sherlock says. Stupid. As if John might not have noticed. He bites his lip. Now John will want to leave, because what is the point of this frankly embarrassing exercise?

“But you haven’t,” John points out. “Anyway ... suppose I want to give you a show, hm?”

An airplane takes off inside Sherlock’s head. John will — He can — Sherlock speaks quickly, before he can second-guess himself: “On the chair. The one you usually sit in. With your trousers and pants halfway down your thighs.”

John shoves his clothes down.

“Just there. Yes.”

“Do you like that in general, or ...?”
Sherlock is distracted by imagining the texture of the upholstery against John’s bare bum, so it takes him a moment to reply. “In the changing room at the physiotherapists’. I asked you to come along on a case. The diamond merchant. You thought he might have been caught by surprise while tidying his flat, ridiculous notion but you drew my attention to the vacuum cleaner.”

“Ta for the compliment. And the changing room?” John squirts lotion into his palm and cups the head of his prick, which commences to fatten again. He gives it a tug, runs his forefinger around the slit. He’s watching Sherlock watch; his eyebrows are raised; if his expression could be reduced to typescript it would, of course, spell *Like what you see?*

*God, yes. “You were getting dressed. I caught you halfway.”*

“And you got a look at my kit.” John hooks a forefinger under the shaft and strokes lightly, teasing himself while also displaying the merchandise.

Sherlock admires this two-for-one efficiency. Speech having become difficult, he nods.

“You wanted it.”

Nod.

“Hmm. Sit down, will you? I’m getting a crick in my neck.” *Stroke.* John’s prick fills. It stands; Sherlock sits, in the chair opposite John’s. “That’s better. ... Okay, you want me to tell you what I want to do to you? It’s a very long list, I’ll have you know. I will” — stroke — “definitely” — stroke — “not have time” — stroke — “to get through all of it” — John brings his other hand to his balls and cups them — “before I come. So. One thing to focus on. *Oh.*

“You’re naked. I’m not. You — you’re hard. Don’t want you to come too fast, so I put — ah. A cock ring on you. You’re so pretty for me, with your hands behind your back. I like that. You’ll have noticed.”

Sherlock nods, rapidly.

“Take yourself out if you want. God. I want to see. *Yes.*” John’s hand stills on his prick. His tongue runs over his lower lip, twice, then his upper lip. “And you — I want to paddle you. On my lap. Like that, would you like that? Yeah. I have this rubber paddle, black — I think about how it would look against your skin. I can make it hurt — ah — a lot. I’d start out easy, I think, the first few times anyway, I dunno, later maybe — maybe I’d get going hard and fast right away, make you shout. Play with your balls a bit, from behind like that, oh yeah — ”

Sherlock wants to touch himself; and doesn’t want to: wants — *I want it to belong to John,* he thinks wildly. John hasn’t asked, but Sherlock puts his hands behind his back anyway. At this, a gasp from John. Sherlock’s prick stands straight up with nothing to conceal it. He is mortally embarrassed; he wants to be on his knees. He stays in the chair; but he leaves his hands where they are.

“Oh, that’s lovely.” John’s voice is soft, his gaze avid. “That’s mine, isn’t it. You’re on my lap with your cock all tight and hard like that, and. Your arse, it’s so red. When I touch your skin there, it’s almost too hot. So sore. You like that. I’ll give it a pinch where it’s tender. Spread you, play with your hole. Just — just stroke all around it, get it all nice and soft for me so when I fuck you later it’s — *Christ* — easy — ”

Sherlock is on the floor in front of John and not doing anything like thinking anymore. He has dropped clumsily, because of his legs, but even this awareness doesn’t impinge, not when John is coming and Sherlock has to, must, absolutely must be right there, on his knees with his lips parted,
please, please, and John makes a soft sound and looks a question at him and Sherlock opens his mouth more please and John wipes his palm with the come on it over Sherlock’s mouth and fucks Sherlock’s mouth with his messy fingers and says, “Do you want to come?” and Sherlock makes a noise that means yes please yes and John reaches down with his free hand and gives Sherlock’s prick three tugs, Sherlock manages to count them, three tugs is all it takes until he is crying out and John’s hand leaves his mouth, John grabs Sherlock’s hair instead and kisses him, please, still stroking his prick, until Sherlock is too sensitive and protests a little and John gives him one more stroke anyway just because That’s mine, isn’t it and then slides to the floor next to Sherlock and embraces him.

After a moment: “Here we are on the floor again with tissues,” Sherlock says.

John kisses his cheek, side-eyes him. “I hope it was an improvement over the last time.”

“Well,” Sherlock says, “last time you had your trousers on, so, yes, I would have to characterize this as a step up.”

“Oh,” John says, “sly.”

He rises, hoisting his trousers, and heads for the loo, returning cleaned up and put away, with a damp flannel for Sherlock.

In John’s brief absence, queasiness has begun to creep over Sherlock. He had dropped to his knees, and not gracefully; had opened his mouth like a bird to clean off John’s hand, wordlessly begging ... He reaches for the flannel but John says, “I like doing this bit — if you — ?: in which Sherlock hears a note of not-quite-anxiety matching his own. It is impermissible that John should be made to feel anxious, yet his uncertainty comes as a relief. “Yes,” Sherlock says, “all right.”

“Hm. Hands.” (How fast, Sherlock wonders, clasping his hands at the small of his back, can I develop a conditioned response to that word spoken in that tone? Very fast, if he can judge by the pulse of arousal he feels at hearing it now, and never mind that he came much too recently for the pulse to translate into anything more.) John dabs at Sherlock’s chin where there’s a spot of his, John’s, come, then pats the cloth over Sherlock’s prick, pulling back the foreskin, tidying and teasing (again that admirable economy of means), and then tucks him in and zips him up. Not without taking hold of the bulge and squeezing, so so gently: That’s mine, isn’t it. It hadn’t been a question when John said it before, and the gesture isn’t a question now; still, Sherlock finds himself inwardly answering. Yes, it is.

What now? Sherlock was uncertain what niceties of etiquette might apply to the circumstance of watching one’s ... imminent lover? lover, tout court? (Does it make a difference? Probably it matters whether the masturbator is an intimate or a mere acquaintance; in the latter case, money or some disinhibiting chemical, or both, would likely be involved, which would alter the expectations those present had of each other’s behavior — but these hypotheticals don’t apply to the present conditions — Anyway:) ... it’s not clear what etiquette applies to watching a person with whom one is emotionally and more or less sexually involved masturbate in one’s sitting room, and as to the aftermath of such an event Sherlock draws a complete blank. John helps by rising again and extending a hand to pull him up, but once the few seconds taken up by this transition have passed, he’s back to being at a loss. So, to judge by the expression on John’s face, is John, and the way he clears his throat confirms it.

Once again, Sherlock finds himself deciding to speak without allowing enough time to hesitate. It feels like taking the blocks out from in front of the wheels of a car with the engine running and the gears engaged: move fast and get out of the way. “You might stay,” he says.
Sherlock wakes and uses the loo; then, after only a little hesitation, climbs back under the covers just as John stirs, stretches, and scrubs at his face. There’s a moment when, though John’s eyes have opened, he’s still mostly asleep; but as soon as he crosses the threshold of waking, uneasiness clouds his face. Sherlock sees him force it back.

“Morning.” Tone studiedly casual.

Why is John uneasy, when Sherlock made his enthusiasm plain?

Oh. Sherlock’s chest feels tight. Had he not made his enthusiasm plain on a previous occasion — had he not kissed John, had he not done, with every appearance of wholeheartedness, just as John asked, sexually; had he not orgasmed?

In fact what John learned of Sherlock, sexually, after Guildford, is that Sherlock lies. Whereas John has never given Sherlock a reason to mistrust him, the reverse cannot be said. This is twice in the span of less than nine hours that Sherlock has been faced with the damage he himself has done. “I’m sorry!” he bursts out, stricken.

John squeezes his eyes shut — “Right” — and makes to get up.

“No!” Sherlock says, realizing his error. “I’m not sorry. I mean, not sorry for last night. I’m sorry for the — the other time,” he concludes miserably.

“Ah.” John subsides into the bed. “Okay, yeah, I had a moment there. ...” He puts a hand on Sherlock and urges him closer. “Here, the loo will keep for a bit.”

In some consternation, Sherlock rests his head on John’s shoulder; his right arm finds its way around John’s chest.

“Time is it? Feels early.”

“Just before seven. You’re due at the clinic at nine.”

“Looked in my phone, did you?”

Sherlock purses his lips, which John ought not to be able to see given their relative positions, but he seems to read the movement anyway, because he gives Sherlock a little shake.

“I do know my work schedule, thanks. Lend me a pair of pants?”

This conversation is objectively tedious, but Sherlock is not bored. “This conversation is objectively tedious. Why am I not bored?” he demands.

John snorts at this. Sherlock feels him pause between breaths, though: he’s taking the question seriously. A few moments pass before he says:

“Maybe you like the notion that us waking up together could just be ordinary life. Something like that.”

Sherlock had not previously considered such a possibility; their dating dinners, the good-night kisses, had seemed to occur in some space extraneous to waking, sleeping, the Work. It’s a shock, he finds, to realize that there’s a passageway between the ecstatic state of being on his knees to lick John’s fingers clean, and having a conversation about John’s work schedule and the need for fresh pants the next morning. No, there’s no passageway: there’s no separation at all. Sherlock came to understand, some while ago, that just as Jim-having-sex was not different to Jim, so John-having-sex was not
different to John. Lately, he seems to spend considerable time being thunderstruck by the simplest ideas, and here comes another one: Sherlock-having-sex-with-John is, apparently, not different to Sherlock.

Except perhaps for being less prone to irritation with mundane exchanges. “Pants in the left-hand drawer. And you’ll want socks, in the right,” he essays, and lies in the bed blinking while John kisses his hair, slides out from under him, and walks to the loo.

There’s the sound of John pissing, then the shower as it heats up. Sherlock rolls over onto John’s spot, still barely warm, and breathes at his pillow. So this is happiness!

John, having showered, drunk a cup of coffee, and eaten some leftover masala dosa he found in Sherlock’s fridge, begins having responsible thoughts. He and Sherlock got lucky last night, going into, well, a scene really — mild, but still — almost all on the basis of nonverbal communication and a few check-ins. Given their history together, and even more given Sherlock’s history, that was reckless — on both their parts, but especially John’s, since he’s the more experienced partner. The clinic’s but twenty minutes away and it’s not even eight o’clock, so the conversation may as well start now. John pours himself and Sherlock more coffee, takes a breath, and, suspecting he knows exactly how Sherlock will react, he jumps.

“We should, er, have a talk, you know, about what sorts of things each of us specially likes, what’s off the table entirely.”

“Weigh. No, we shouldn’t.”

*Got it in one,* John thinks. *Boring and Unnecessary and For God’s sake, can’t we just get on with it?* He gives Sherlock an old-fashioned look.

Sherlock sighs and returns his most put-upon face. “Fine. It’s patently obvious what you prefer. Restraint, spanking, paddling, and presumably flogging and whipping. I expect you enjoy causing pain by other means as well. Teasing. You like to control your partner’s orgasm.” (John blushes.) ”Fellatio, anal sex in which you penetrate your partner. Submission and humiliation in general. No doubt the list is incomplete, but am I wrong in any particular?”

John shakes his head.

“Well,” John says, “it might be nice to do a bit better than ‘not averse to.’”

Sherlock presses his lips together. “No doubt, but that’s what’s available. I’ve told you before that all of this” — he waves a hand between himself and John — “is territory marked ‘Jim.’ Some of it has recently been disengaged from those associations, yes. As for the rest, you’re asking me to distinguish between what is Jim’s and what is mine, and I cannot tell you because I don’t know.”

Belatedly, John realizes that he has been thinking magically: last night was supposed to leave Sherlock feeling so good that the consequences of having his sexual gifts turned against him would fall away, leaving behind no more, perhaps, than a hard limit here and there, like remnants of stone that mark the place in a woodland where some long-forgotten prison once stood. “It’s meant to be one of those unbreakable rules,” he says finally. “Have safety signals, respect each other’s limits, negotiate with a new partner. I want this to work, Sherlock. And not just because I’m such an altruist, either.”
Sherlock brushes down the sides of his dressing gown, just the way he does when settling the lines of his suit, and tilts his head at John. “Would you not say that last night qualifies as a success?”

The memory makes John grin, in spite of himself.

“Yes,” Sherlock says. “And in my opinion, too. You said, just now, ‘with a new partner.’ But we’re not new partners, John, not really new, and as for what I like, what I don’t like, what is irretrievably paired with Jim in my sexual responses, it seems I must learn as I go. —The point being that to do so seems possible, now. Last night was more than agreeable and the fantasy you described attracts me strongly. We might, if it suits you, go on from there.”

John lets that sit in the air a moment, to consider. Last night, for the first time, he let go of caution — not the way he might have with someone he’s bedded a dozen times, someone like Bill, say, but enough to let himself taste, in more than imagination and wishes, what he and Sherlock could have, and *Jesus Christ* that moment when Sherlock put his hands behind his back, and then again when Sherlock slid to his knees, and then John wiped his come over Sherlock’s face, used his fingers to fuck the come into Sherlock’s mouth — Oh, yeah, it suits me, John thinks. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

For winter’s rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

— Algernon Charles Swinburne, Chorus from “Atalanta in Calydon”
Chapter Summary

Sherlock hadn’t followed the case of the Syrian refugees, anyway. It had amounted, after all, to a technical problem, a matter of finding evidence that Anderson overlooked, an opportunity to observe the effects of hyperthermia on an unusually young speci—

Chapter Notes

... TAKE THE UNIVERSE [Death said] AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—Death waved a hand. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME ... SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

“Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what’s the point—”

MY POINT EXACTLY.

— Terry Pratchett, Hogfather

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After John has left for work, Sherlock turns his attention to Molly Hooper.

He has committed to memory certain norms of gift-giving, because the presents people make one another reveal so much about the emotional tenor of their relationship — at least, as that relationship appears from the vantage, or in the fantasies, of the giver. Sherlock knows the following rules:

1. A gift should in some way be congruent with the recipient’s interests.
2. In an exchange, the gifts should be approximately equivalent in value, although ...
3. ... there is an exception for intimates whose resources are widely disparate (e.g., parent and young child); and ...
4. ... “value” may not be accounted in monetary terms; it would be difficult, for example to assign a monetary value to the tissue samples Molly sent him after Jim’s emails went out.
5. A gift directed toward one of the recipient’s dependents may be greeted with special enthusiasm, as in an embezzlement case Sherlock solved some years back, when the culprit had won her employer’s trust partly by giving the employer old LPs the embezzler had “serendipitously found at jumble sales,” and which the employer’s teenaged son collected.

Sherlock has never troubled himself either to ask or to deduce what interests Molly Hooper may pursue apart from forensic pathology. He would gladly supply an item or items useful in that realm, but he is fairly sure that she is in possession of all the worthwhile texts and, as for specimens, her
The latter condition rules out stealing an interesting and unusual specimen from another lab, too, because Molly has professional connections all over London. Sherlock well knows this, having often availed himself of them. There is also the difficulty that neither Molly nor, crucially, John would approve.

Little as Sherlock knows of Molly’s nonprofessional life, however, he cannot help but be aware of her cat, because numerous labeled photographs adorn the wall over Molly’s desk. The cat amuses and comforts her, and his name is Toby. A gift directed toward Toby would come within the parameters of the first rule of gift-giving; also, and Sherlock is pleased with himself for thinking of this, Toby’s importance to Molly would augment the nonmonetary “caring” value of the gift in a way consonant with the intent behind her gift to Sherlock of the tissue samples and the card.

What is an appropriate gift for a cat?

* 

Three hours later, Sherlock has read most of a pirated copy he found online of The Domestic Cat: The Biology of Its Behavior, as well as a number of articles discussing the value of foraging activities in preserving the mental health of captive animals, a category that comprises not only zoo animals but also pets. One of these articles includes an embedded video of a series of acrobatics performed by a black-and-white rat.

Sherlock orders an array of puzzle toys for cats to be delivered to Molly’s flat; and then he sits unmoving for some time, bemused. There was a small warm weight in his palm; a chewed papier-mâché mountain; himself saying, “Mycroft, you must see what Silvanus can do. You must come see now.”

Mycroft’s voice, fond and approving. Mycroft’s arm around him. The blazing, glad pride at having impressed Mycroft.

Sherlock would have said, not that anyone was asking, that it was decades since he had missed his older brother. Or even had thought of him as an older brother, at all.

* 

Sherlock shuts down his laptop and walks to Regent’s Park and back.

* 

Sherlock takes inventory of the tea in his cupboard. He is low on loose-leaf Assam. He goes to Tesco, makes the frankly alarming discovery that there exists green “caramelized apple” flavor tea, is distracted enough by this to nearly (but not quite) forget the Assam, and then goes home.

* 

It’s just shy of two p.m. and Sherlock has run out of distractions.

Since the night Jim killed himself, Sherlock has not unlocked his blog, or John’s, nor has he researched anything more criminally relevant than the behavior of domestic cats, nor has he visited any of the law enforcement chat rooms he used to drop in on to inform himself concerning exactly how various police and government officials were making idiots of themselves.

He hasn’t read the news.
He had not followed the case of the Syrian refugees, anyway. It had amounted, after all, to a technical problem, a matter of finding evidence that Anderson overlooked, an opportunity to observe the effects of hyperthermia on an unusually young speci—

No, it hasn’t been possible to offer himself that account for some time. Sherlock formally gives up the effort.

He presses the laptop’s power button and sits with his palms quiet on his thighs while it boots. He closes his eyes, briefly; then he looks up the past few months’ news.

Two days after he visited the abandoned lorry with its carefully arranged water bottles: “Owner of death lorry missing,” and more or less lurid variants thereof; then, a week later, “Death lorry owner found dead,” ditto. Gerald Campion, forty-four, car parked in garage with the gate pulled down, ignition on and no petrol left in the tank: carbon monoxide poisoning; rotting corpse found when the garage’s owners, with whom he had no apparent social or business connections, returned from a motoring holiday in Scotland; ruled a suicide, motivated by guilt and fear of incarceration; grieving widow, Margaret, insists she had no idea what her husband was mixed up in ...

Sherlock takes a moment to reflect on the pleasing symmetry of the lorry’s owner being found dead in a closed vehicle, and thinks Oh, really? at the widow. Margaret Campion may be telling the truth, or she may have taken her husband’s death as a salutary warning. He adds another Oh, really? at the owners of the garage, because it would be a remarkable criminal organization indeed that kept a database of entirely unconnected persons’ holiday plans with a view to having untenanted space available for the staging of suicides.

The lorry driver, Frank Hindemith, has been arrested and charged with smuggling illegal migrants and six counts of manslaughter. Sherlock can find no report of his death in custody. If he is indeed alive, odds are that, unlike Gerald Campion, he knows nothing that could benefit investigators. At least, investigators who are not Sherlock. Where is he held ... ? Yes, there’s a mention. Belmarsh, of course.

The most recent news account is over a month old, and there the trail of publicly available information ends. Like the photographs of Sherlock, the deaths of six anonymous migrants were a nine-days’ wonder. For there have been many more such, though not arranged for Sherlock’s benefit ...

Sherlock logs into the Yard’s Major Investigation Database (relief: Lestrade hasn’t changed his password since the last time Sherlock stole it). The only data to be had is the absence of data: no further arrests have been made, and the case has been turned over to the National Crime Agency’s migrant-smuggling division.

To whose intranet Sherlock has not got access. He rests his chin in his hands; the wish that he had found some way to keep Jim alive will not leave him.

It was inelegant to kill so many, for the sake of Sherlock’s attention. Crude, even. Jim might have achieved his aim with — with a sense of comedy, even, as he had when he sent the impersonators. Sherlock would have liked to bring this home to Jim. Suppose Jim had gone to prison for the murders, and for smuggling migrants, he would have had occasion to reflect on the clumsiness of his means.

To watch Jim’s face as he was sentenced might have been like shaking Jim, or punching him. Jim can’t affect the world from behind the wall of death, but he is safe from the world’s vengeance too. However, he has left an enterprise behind, and if it is still functioning, Sherlock means to destroy it.
Sherlock is in the cab on the way to Barts’ when it occurs to him that perhaps killing six refugees to get a rise out of him was Jim’s idea of comedy.

*

“Sherlock!”

Molly is blessedly transparent: it’s one reason why, convenient/inconvenient though he finds her crush on him, Sherlock likes her. Unable to mislead anyone about her inner condition, she doesn’t waste time in the attempt.

Now Molly shows clearly several steps of feeling: First, pleasure at seeing Sherlock — a pleasure always mixed, for her, with anxiety and self-consciousness, but pleasure nevertheless.

Second, but just barely second because it comes on so rapidly, there is dismay, at the sudden recollection of the reasons for Sherlock’s long absence.

Third, anxiety again, this time at the forefront, and arising from uncertainty with respect to how she should greet Sherlock and what she should say. Sherlock would be happy to answer such questions if he knew what the answers should be. Failing that, he preempts her: “I’ve had some things sent to your flat,” he says, and, at Molly’s consternated expression: “For your cat, that is. To reciprocate the pancreatic samples and the — the card.”

Molly has been moving her hands indecisively — to hug or not to hug — and Sherlock surprises himself by stepping closer to her and offering an embrace: as brief as he can make it, of course, because the sensation is unfamiliar and he isn’t sure himself whether he “means it,” whatever that signifies. He supposes he must mean it, since he did it to alleviate Molly’s discomfort or perhaps his own (with respect to the question of sincerity, it doesn’t matter which; it matters only with respect to the question of altruism, but Sherlock is certainly not altruistic, so it must be his own discomfort-with-Molly’s-discomfort that he’s alleviating, albeit at the price of increasing another aspect of his discomfort, and apparently it matters to him that Molly Hooper should not be too uncomfortable —)

Molly steps back and drags him out of the altruism-versus-egoism hall of mirrors: “Presents for Toby and a surprise visit. I know you want something, Sherlock. Corneas? Livers? Burnt skin?” She has overshot “plausibly relaxed,” but not by much, and Sherlock is impressed in spite of himself.

“Livers always come in handy,” he concedes, “but no. ... You remember that sextuple murder-by-sealed-lorry.”

Sherlock has never imagined the Molly who appears before him now: she ought to have wings and a flaming sword to go with the look on her face.

“You’re investigating it,” Molly says, not making it a question. “Good. Good. Because NCA took it over” — Sherlock nods, impatient with what he already knows — “and they’ve decided this isn’t relevant —”

This, meaning ...? But Molly is already at her keyboard, calling up the files. “Wait,” she says, and there’s the photo of one of the three men in the group, lying on his side on the autopsy table; a red-welted diagonal runs from just above his hip to the line of his rib cage, inflamed suture marks paralleling it on either side. “Remember that?”

Of course; but it wasn’t what enabled Sherlock to lead Lestrade to the truck’s owner, and Sherlock hadn’t been focused on the larger question of refugee-smuggling, at the time. “He sold a kidney.”

“But, Sherlock, I don’t think he sold it in the UK — people from the UK buy kidneys, sure, but they
don’t buy them here. Plus, that incision’s a couple of weeks old. Plus, if the surgery had been done here, it would have been laparoscopic. You wouldn’t get a monster scar like that one.

Sherlock follows the logic out: “Istanbul, then. Plenty of transplant hospitals” — Molly nods — “plenty of potential donors among the Syrians fleeing via Turkey. So, a vertically integrated enterprise ... Selling organs to one set of customers, and paying the donors with passage to Europe. Hospital, vessels, land transportation ... But the NCA and the Border Agency aren’t looking at the Turkish end, they just want to seal off the UK, and they’re only working backward from the lorry’s owner.”

“Who’s dead.”

Sherlock looks at her.

Molly shrugs, a little defensive. “I’ve been following the progress. And there isn’t any progress! I know it happens, every couple of weeks you hear about migrants stuffed into lorries and left to die, but ... Well, you know, Sherlock. It’s the baby. It just — You know.”

“Moriarty set it up,” Sherlock says, abruptly. “To get at me. He told me, before he shot himself.”

“That’s awful!” And, after a moment: “Do you think he was telling the truth?”

Sherlock startles. He had set aside any possibility that the refugee family’s deaths were adventitious; Jim’s confirmation of their part in his pursuit of Sherlock had been, on second thought, neither here nor there, but such malevolent means, turned to the petty end of baiting one person, seem exactly Jim-like.

Of course, so does lying.

Is it better to have been a bystander, rather than the object of those deaths?

"It seemed something Ji— Moriarty would do. There isn’t an obvious reason to have left them in the lorry, otherwise.”

“No,” Molly says. “I guess not.” She presses her lips together, looking at the scar in the photograph.

Istanbul. Most of the transplant centers there require documentation of a familial relationship between donor and recipient; high-volume they may be, for-profit they may be, but organ traffickers they are not. At least, their administrators talk a good line, and maybe even mean it. But not all documentation is authentic and not all transplant surgeons have scruples. It would surely be more efficient to work outward from the names of unscrupulous surgeons in looking for possible connections with Moriarty, but without any hints concerning which surgeons are unscrupulous ... Ah: if such surgeons wish to succeed over the long term they must do their best to avoid rejection of the transplanted organ. Which means they must obtain some data on the sellers. They may routinely destroy those records; or they may not. “Molly, I need — ”

But she’s already handing him a thumb drive. “The autopsy records, including fingerprints, palm prints, and toe prints. I’ve preserved tissue samples as well, from all of them, not just the one who gave up the kidney. I mean, my own set of samples, besides the ones that the NCA is using. The DNA profiles, the blood types, the data from my samples — they’re on the drive.”

“Molly Hooper.” Sherlock is delighted and astonished in equal measure.

She hunches her shoulders and looks away. “I knew eventually you’d be looking into it, that’s all.”
Sherlock’s understanding of Dr. Molly Hooper has just rearranged itself. “Give my best to Toby,” he says, tucking the flash drive into his pocket, and then, an over-the-shoulder afterthought on his way out the door:

“Thank you.”

Molly has already turned back to her microscope. “Get them,” she says, not too quietly for Sherlock to hear.

*

SH to GL, 15:40

Get me in to see Hindemith.

Sherlock hits Send, then makes an impatient noise: Lestrade’s reply will consist of an interrogation point unless he is supplied clarification.

SH to GL, 15:41

The driver of the lorry with the dead Syrians.

GL to SH, 15:45

It’s an NCA case. I haven’t got a pretext.

SH to GL, 15:47

Surely you know someone in administration at Belmarsh.

(“‘Surely you know someone,’” Lestrade mouths at his phone, making poncy faces. Aloud: “Back to normal, then, are we?”)

The pile of paperwork on Lestrade’s desk won’t finish itself, but on the other hand it isn’t growing legs and running off to Ibiza, either; and although he doesn’t, in fact, know anyone in administration at Belmarsh, he does hold the rank of detective inspector of the Metropolitan Police. If he wants to bring in a consultant to interview a prisoner ...

GL to SH, 15:53

Me myself and I, that’s who I know. Meet you at the entrance in an hour.

SH to GL, 15:54

I’m in a cab outside NSY. Hurry up.

*

Aesthetically speaking, the world will take a step up once Frank Hindemith is convicted and therefore obliged to wear prison clothing instead of his own teal-colored nylon track pants and red “Property of Man United” T. If a tsunami klaxon could wear clothes, it would dress like Frank Hindemith on remand.

The man himself looks miserable. He glances at Lestrade, does a double-take at Sherlock, opens his mouth, closes it again, and sits, slouched, looking down at the table.
Sherlock, having braced himself at the double-take for some variation on “You’re the bloke whose pictures that other bloke sent out,” steeples his hands to quiet them.

Lestrade says, “We’re here to ask you a few questions about — ”

Sherlock’s discomfiture has made him slow to register what Hindemith’s body language clearly says: the man is sick at heart. Now he breaks in: “You’re cooperating with the investigation and planning to plead guilty.” Lestrade makes a noise, the start of a protest, then throws up his hands and leans back in his chair.

Hindemith brings his eyes up to Sherlock’s, slowly. “Yeah. Of course I am.”

Typically, Sherlock meets criminals angry at being caught; criminals too dim or too selfish, or both too dim and too selfish, to appreciate the import of their deeds; criminals whose moaning and wailing and loud regrets devolve quick-march into self-justifications and the casting of aspersions on their victim (“She shouldn’t have cheated on me” is a favorite in this category). The genuinely remorseful wrongdoer, whether petty thief, killer, or urbane connoisseur of overseas tax havens, is a rare bird indeed, and under other circumstances Sherlock would be thrilled to encounter one and study him.

“How did you come to be driving the lorry?” he asks.

Hindemith doesn’t say, “I’ve told the NCA all this a dozen times,” or “Can’t you just look at the files, for Christ’s sake, why do I have to go over it again with you?” He says:

“I knew Gerry — Gerry Campion that is — he’d hired me to drive for him a couple times before. I don— didn’t have a regular job, see, just fill-in work for different firms when a driver called in sick or whatever. I reckon he knew I needed money, well who doesn’t need money?” Looking at Sherlock’s suit: “I guess maybe you don’t.” There’s no malice in his voice; he’s just making an observation, and not a bad one at that.

Interesting that he recognizes the quality of Sherlock’s suit when he himself is so badly dressed. The terrible clothes aren’t his, then, and the getup is down to indifference — indifference and despair. For an instant, Sherlock is twenty-five again, and buying a plane ticket to New York City: one-way, because he doesn’t seriously expect to return.

But Hindemith has resumed his account:

“So he rang me one day and said he had a steady gig he wanted me for, but he’d only talk about it in person, not over the phone. I knew it had to be dodgy, but — ” Hindemith shakes his head. “Well, so we met up and he told me what it was, drive some fruit and veg into Calais, come back with a load of people. Every week, he said it would be, paid in cash, more money than I’d see in most months.”

“How did the pickups in Calais work?”

“I’d drop off the fruit and veg with a wholesaler. That was for real — normal paperwork, receipts and all. Then I’d go by this particular BP station. Pay for the petrol, pull round the back like I was parking to use the loo, step inside to buy a candy bar, clerk hands me an envelope with the money and when I came back out there’d be people waiting by the lorry for me to load them up.”

“Same clerk every time?”

“I think so. But I was trying not to pay too much attention, you know? Sort of... trying not to look too close.”

He’s telling the truth. Unfortunate, but the petrol station clerk likely quit his post and, if he has any
sense, left Calais as soon as the lorry with its cargo of dead appeared on the news. In any case he would have been about as well-informed as Hindemith about the larger workings of the operation, so unlikely to be worth the trouble of tracking down. Hindemith at least has the virtue of being conveniently to hand. “Go on.”

“Okay, so I made a couple runs. Four runs. Two thousand quid in my pocket. Paid all my bills, got my girlfriend a gold bracelet, first time I’ve ever been able to get her anything nice ...”

Sherlock wants to wave this away, boring, but he also wants Hindemith to keep talking, so he only shifts in his seat, as a hint.

Hindemith takes it. “Right, sorry. So that last run. Same as the others, same pay, only this time Gerry tells me leave the lorry on that patch of ground where you lot found it, someone’ll be along to pick it up and drive it the rest of the way to wherever it was going.”

“Where were you driving to, the other times?”

“Just Gerry’s lorry garage. I’d leave the truck unlocked, open the back, and be on my way. Never even saw Gerry at the drop-off, never saw who came for the people. Or if anybody did, or they just went off on their own.”

All right, there may be something at the lorry garage that the official investigation has missed. First, the garage where Campion died; second, the lorry garage; third, Campion’s widow.

“How did you get the rest of the way to London after you left the Syrians?”

“I rang Gerry and he picked me up on the verge. Dropped me at a tube station and said good night.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing. Nothing. I didn’t even ask him if he was sure they’d be okay. I just ... got on the tube and went home.”

“Who removed the lorry’s number plates?”

“I don’t know. Not Gerry, least not while I was there.”

Jim himself, then? After all, it was his party. Oh. Yes, it must have been Jim: he would have relished the opportunity to taunt his victims.

There’s a window in the wall behind Hindemith. Its right edge runs parallel to the line of Hindemith’s spine, a foot or so to his left. Through it neither sky nor tree nor ground is visible. Seen from a different vantage, it would probably not give so perfect a statement of emptiness.

They would have been physically all right overnight, not overheated; thirsty, for they already had little or no water left; but in growing alarm after Jim ... said whatever he might be imagined to have said, and then left them. The next day, the temperature was well into the thirties by mid-morning. What group of refugees Jim picked must have depended on the weather; if it hadn’t been hot that week, the Syrian family would now be making its asylum application and some other group of sufferers would have died instead. Sherlock finds this randomness offensive in a way he cannot at the moment explain to himself.

Someone driving past might have phoned the police about an abandoned lorry. A risk Jim took: the family might have been rescued. But most drivers, if they registered the lorry’s presence at all, would have assumed the driver had pulled off because he’d been caught short needing a loo, or maybe was
just that tired.

The people inside the truck must have realized early on that they were not where anyone would hear them. Sherlock wonders what, exactly, made a given moment the one in which it was decided to put an end to the baby. Probably she had been silent and listless for some time before that point —

Sherlock discontinues this train of thought.

When he re-emerges, both Hindemith and Lestrade are staring at him, wearing the identical expression of having made an intuitive leap and not liking the place where they have landed, not one bit. Sherlock is up before either of them can speak — “Good afternoon,” he tells Hindemith, “thank you for your assistance,” and waits for the guard to open the door, not turning his head though he can feel Hindemith’s gaze on him. By the time the door opens, Lestrade and Hindemith have exchanged some departing pleasantries as well, to which Sherlock strenuously does not listen.

The DI holds his tongue till their cab arrives at the Yard, where he motions Sherlock out and toward the line of cement planters: “C’mon, I want a word with you and no third parties.” Sherlock supposes he should be grateful; he knows precisely what’s coming next, and Lestrade does not disappoint him:

“Moriarty killed six people just to get at you.”

“You’ve worked it out,” Sherlock replies; “why ask me?” He can’t manage any venom. He is aware that this failing is more and more frequent with him of late.

“That was him you went running after, at the scene.”

“The deductions come thick and fast.”

“Jesus, Sherlock. I thought I knew how bad it was, but — Christ, I’m giving you at least a year off from me calling you a posh wank—”

The look on Lestrade’s face as he registers what he was about to say would be well suited to someone who has just found himself running straight off a cliff.

Sherlock laughs, and laughs, and laughs. More than Lestrade’s word choice would really justify, but maybe the right amount for the first time he has ever been able to laugh at anything to do with Jim. The harder Lestrade apologizes, the more Sherlock laughs, and when he’s spent and has caught his breath, he finds himself in a strangely reckless frame of mind. He says:

“It’s likely I’ll come to need crutches within the next year or so.” He has been meaning to say something of the sort for weeks, after all.

Lestrade doesn’t look startled, or say, “What are you on about?” He only hesitates a moment before asking: “It’s progressive, then?”

Sherlock gapes like any goldfish.

“The braces, Sherlock. I do notice things sometimes.”

“They’re meant to be inconspicuous,” Sherlock replies, faintly.

“They’re conspicuous enough when you’re rooting about under a skip and your trousers ride up.”

The reference is to a case over a year ago, when Sherlock had traced a missing painting to that unlovely hiding place. Lestrade has known all this time. Sherlock leans against the planter, trying to
think. “Did anyone else ... ?”

“Nah. I made sure they all had something to do in the other direction. It wasn’t exactly a leap, you know, figuring if you hadn’t told me then you didn’t want it known.”

“Right. Yes. That’s — Thank you.”

Lestrade waves this away. “But what’s going on, then?”

Sherlock explains.

“You’re — sorted for a good doctor, and all? No, of course you are, that’s how you got it diagnosed in the first place.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Yeah?”

_Maddening_. Sherlock marshals his patience. “Not only my strength but my stamina is diminished. I can’t run long distances. Some months ago I nearly slid off a roof where I was conducting surveillance, because my left leg would no longer support me. So I won’t. Be as useful.”

“Jesus,” Lestrade says, fumbling in his pockets, “I’m never going to quit the fags, long as I’ve got to deal with the likes of you. I bet John gives you holy hell for smoking, and no I am not offering you one, I know better than to get on his bad side.” He inhales deeply and blows the smoke into Sherlock’s face. “Not. A. Word. You think I went with my heart in my effing throat to the Director of Public Prosecutions because you’re _useful_? That’s just insulting, that is.”

“Without me, the Yard’s clearance rate —”

“ ‘Clearance rate.’ Like it’s about the clearance rate for you. Like anybody who knows you believes that for a minute. No, not a _word_ out of you. Every case, every single fucking case, you to the fucking rescue. Wrong bloke accused of murdering his wife? Sherlock Holmes clears him with a postcard from rehab. Endangered parrot half dead in a rubbish bin? Sherlock Holmes finds it and the avian vet comes running. Woman puts paid to her husband? Surprise, Sherlock Holmes makes damn sure the police know he’s been whaling on her the past decade. —That’s right, you bastard, Sally told me.— Autistic kid lost in the sewer? Sherlock _bloody_ Holmes works out how to track him and helps him keep his cool till his folks can get there. I could go on.”

At this point, Lestrade doesn’t need to tell Sherlock to keep quiet: Sherlock is dumbstruck.

“Anyway, look.” Lestrade’s tone gentles. “This polio thing is awful, not saying otherwise, but — being honest, now, the first time I arrested you I didn’t fancy your odds of making into this century. Never mind the second time, or the third or the fourth. And here you are. ...” Lestrade finishes his cigarette and makes a face at the butt before he crushes it against the planter. “Jesus, I’ve really got to quit.

“You’ve made a good life, is what I mean. Your b— John thinks you hung the moon. You’re not going to stop being ‘useful’ even if you have to sit down to do it. And your friends aren’t your friends just because you’re ‘useful.’”

Sherlock can feel himself blinking. Blink blink blink blink blink. He isn’t approaching the fugue state brought on by that first post-Jim visit to the Yard; he isn’t even alarmed, particularly. What would a good analogy be? It is not as if he suddenly and unexpectedly found himself without clothing; there’s no feeling of humiliation or even, really, of exposure. No, the sensation is of ... relief — as if, caught
up in a menacing dream, he had armed himself, only to have the menace dissolve, and the armament with it, all at once, to find his dream self standing with empty hands in a world of light and greenery. This is what Jim’s work has come to, then? The revelation, repeated now half a dozen times over, that Dr. Banerjee and John have been right all along in insisting that he is liked, even — the words make him flinch — cared for?

He has a sudden recollection of himself, at a moment he has not thought of in nearly three decades, explaining to the boy seated next to him in his first year at school how he knew the boy’s name — Alan. It was Alan — and the reaction he didn’t understand at the time but now can identify, readily, as fear and suspicion. As for specific incidents in the days following, these Sherlock has lost to time, but he remembers the pattern well enough: the sense memory of falling, of brushing dirt from his trousers ... They’re all stupid, anyway ... The voices tuned to the unmistakable glass-edged pitch of malice. Since he first heard it he has never stopped listening for it.

He used to hear it from Sally Donovan, from time to time; he has not heard it since before the night Jim died. Not, in fact, since the case Lestrade mentioned, of the husband-killing wife ...

The comments on The Science of Deduction, almost all misguided but mostly not unkind ...

Lestrade has just begun to look worried when Sherlock finds his voice. “I —”

And falls silent again, trying to identify a correct form of words. At last it comes to him:

“I count myself your friend, as well,” he says.

“You’d better,” replies Lestrade. “And another thing. If you’re planning anything illegal like, say, breaking into that garage where they found Campion, do me a favor: don’t get caught, and don’t tell me till after it’s done.”

*

Sherlock can remember a time when he would have been annoyed by the pull he feels toward John and away from a visit to the garage Lestrade doesn’t want to hear about him breaking into. But underlying the combined anxiety and eagerness of commencing what is at once an investigation of Jim, and his first investigation since Jim’s suicide, is a curious, buoyant sensation that is not very familiar to him but that he tentatively identifies as well-being. The pull toward John doesn’t annoy him at all; it’s evidence that he has something to look forward to. He’ll have a look at the garage, he decides, and then ...

*

An hour later, standing in the back garden of a handsome red brick house (four bedrooms; two reception rooms; conservatory; owned by the Portenoys, Oliver and Martine) in Dulwich, Sherlock feels his blood quicken.

The garage has been demolished and is now half rebuilt.

Bit of an overreaction, surely, even given the distaste most people would feel at finding a suicide (or “suicide”) in their garage? Usually the professional crime-and-accident-scene cleaners are called in, followed by the refinishers and the painters; for all but the most Daily Mail–worthy horrors, that much makeover suffices. That the Portenoys must have some connection with Jim’s enterprises, Sherlock has already concluded, but what has brought on this remarkably strong emotional response?

Evening has drawn in; he would like to see John; someone will likely be home soon and he needs a look through the place on his own, anyway. Unseen and unheard by the residents of 39 Waltham
Grove, the hunter withdraws.

Chapter End Notes

This is the cat book that Sherlock consults when working out what to buy for Toby.

I had in mind a famous case of an organ-selling Turkish surgeon.

Should you, like Sherlock, be troubled by the fate of refugees, whether from Syria or elsewhere, this article cites four good places to put some money. To their list I might add Mercy Corps and Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors without Borders.
All day I think about it, then at night I say it

Chapter Summary

“I would like to have sex again tonight. If you are agreeable, of course.”

Chapter Notes


John is already home, eating takeaway roast chicken and tabbouleh, when Sherlock arrives. “You don’t need stitches?” he says. “No? Just slumming, then.” Looking pleased, he kisses Sherlock’s mouth, then doesn’t grope Sherlock or order him to pull his trousers down, but instead sits him at the table with a plate of food and pushes some kitchen roll in his direction for serviettes. Within Sherlock, another set of expectations built by Jim crumbles away; he hadn’t even been aware of it as any special expectation, he realizes: it was simply, as far as he knew, how the world worked.

“It’s not Angelo’s,” John says, apologetically, as if Sherlock didn’t know that John would have procured supper from whatever takeaway cookshop was closest to his route home from work. It smells good, nevertheless.

Between bites, Sherlock tells John what John has been about today, and then what he, Sherlock, has been about. John expresses his habitual fascination and amazement and says, quietly, “I’m glad you’re getting back to work.” Sherlock hesitates over the conversation with Lestrade, but then John happens to rub his knuckles pleasantly over Sherlock’s shoulder when he rises to make their tea, so Sherlock tells, and again there is John’s approval to bask in, diminishing the small sharp edge of doubt Sherlock still feels at having revealed himself so fully to Lestrade. “You know,” John says, “he never said word one, even to me. Good thing you told him, Sherlock, he must’ve been worrying all this time.”

That’s hardly my concern, Sherlock is about to reply, but the words die in his throat. He remembers a kitchen, himself transfigured into a quantity of dread in the shape of a person, his mother’s voice, gentle: “The great likelihood, as you have surmised...” Of course he was twelve then, and Lestrade is a grown man, not an adolescent whose mo— All the same, yes, Sherlock can admit that the uncertainty must have been taxing at times. “Perhaps,” he says, “I should undertake a program of improving Lestrade’s detective skills; it might do his career some good.”

John shakes his head, smiling, apparently having heard something Sherlock is unaware of having said. In this and in other respects, the evening at John’s is much like any evening over takeaway at Baker Street.

Except that a long-familiar constraint is gone. When they have drunk their tea, Sherlock finds himself saying:
“I would like to have sex again tonight. If you are agreeable, of course.”

John rests his chin on his hand and ostentatiously takes thought. “Oh, would you?”

His demeanor is innocuous, but his voice: it has changed in a way that makes Sherlock’s chest feel tight, makes him want to fidget, makes a thrum of sweet shock between his legs. John is still John but with something added. Sherlock could squirm naked on the floor in front of this John. He bats against the feeling, just in case John refuses him: “I believe that’s what I said, yes.”

John pushes back from the table and opens his legs. “Come here, then. Stand in front of me. You know where to put your hands.”

Sherlock places himself between John’s thighs, clasps his hands behind his back, breathes hard, suddenly afraid. He doesn’t belong to himself now: he belongs to John. This was his own decision. He can say Stop. He doesn’t want to say Stop. John will probably deliver pain. Sherlock wants to run away, wants the pain —

He feels a hand come to rest against his side, and his breathing steadies. John’s hand. A ship at anchor. John speaks:

“First you’re going to strip for me and get on hands and knees on the bed. I’m going to put a plug in your arse, not a big one, but you can expect it to stay in till we’re done, and if it gets uncomfortable, that’s too bad, because I like it. Got that?”

“Yes, John.”

John smiles, bright with affection. “All right, then. You’re lovely and I’m going to give you everything you want. Now go.” He follows Sherlock to the bedroom doorway.

Sherlock unbuttons his shirt and, on an intuition that the tidiness will please John, folds it carefully. He is caught up enough in thinking of how best to please John that he has opened his trousers and taken hold of the waist to shove them down before he remembers the braces.

John had removed them, that first, disastrous time. It’s all right, Sherlock tells himself, don’t be an idiot, he’s already seen them, he knows what your legs look like.

Last night, though, Sherlock had undressed and got in bed while John was in the loo. John had not been confronted with the braces then. They are ugly. But Sherlock’s (withering) legs are tired; if he takes the braces off, it will be difficult for him to stand for long, in case John should want that later. How to explain any of this? Are explanations even permitted, now? “I — my legs,” he says.

“Tired?”

Sherlock nods. Heat rises in his face: he wanted to be perfect, wanted this to go smoothly —

John leaves his position, leaning in the bedroom doorway, and takes Sherlock by the shoulders. “Stop,” he says, and kisses Sherlock, lightly, on the mouth.

Stop thinking? Stop talking? Oh. Stop. Meaning what it would have meant if Sherlock had said it. In some astonishment, with John’s hands on him keeping off the dismay that would otherwise threaten, Sherlock resettles his trousers and zips them up again. After that he doesn’t know what to do, but John is speaking:
“Here’s what I think.

“Anything to do with your legs, your call. Say ‘Braces,’ and no matter what, we break to deal with them. If your legs are tired, I promise you I know plenty of clever ways to hurt you and make you come, standing or lying or bent over the sofa back.

“Does that work?”

Having begun to recover the ability to think: “What if you’ve gagged me?” Sherlock objects.

“Looking forward to that, are you?” John gives Sherlock’s arse a squeeze. “No gag anytime soon, gorgeous. I want you able to talk to me.”

Scoffing: “Careful.”

“Yep, you’re right. I’m careful with what’s mine. What of it, hm?” With those words, the tone is back in John’s voice, spreading warmth over Sherlock’s skin wherever it touches (and it feels like a physical touch, but human skin doesn’t contain receptors for sound waves, so how ... ?) He is held between John’s hands like a filament of wire with current passing through it. John slaps his arse through the trousers, once, barely hard enough to sting. “Now get your clothes off.”

Sherlock strips, folds his trousers, leaves the braces on; steals a glance to take in John’s reaction (tongue touching upper lip; caught breath; head tilted a bit more than five degrees; gaze steady — favorable, then); and takes the two steps that lead him the rest of the way to John’s bed. _Humiliation._ John will like to see Sherlock crawl onto the bed with no effort to avoid awkwardness. Exposing himself.

The skin over Sherlock’s cheekbones feels hot. He bends over the bed, braces his arms, brings up one leg and then the other, keeping them wide apart to give John as good a view as possible of his genitals. The leg braces drag against the coverlet; he tries to ignore this. He can hear John, behind him: opening a drawer, taking out and setting on the bed what is presumably the equipment he plans to use this evening. Sherlock situates himself so that his arse is at the end of the bed, his feet hanging over, and rests his head on his bent arms. He was already aroused but this _shameful_ display sends him hard immediately; being aroused by _shame display_ intensifies his humiliation, _John will like it,_ which makes him harder yet. His hips rock without his conscious intervention.

Warm hands cup his arse; then, two hard slaps, one per side. The symmetry is not quite perfect: John’s right arm is surer than his injured left. The hands stroke and cup; the left hand dips between Sherlock’s legs and strokes the seam between his balls and his hole, as lightly as Sherlock, thinking, might stroke his own lip. “Do you like that?”

“Yes, John.” Sherlock’s voice comes out a whisper.

The hand between Sherlock’s legs withdraws and John’s other hand, the one on Sherlock’s arse, shifts: he is picking up one of the items he brought out before. Snap of a glove. A flip-cap opens. Sherlock bites his lip. Keeps still. John’s touch returns as one finger, cold — Sherlock makes a noise at the shock, _embarrassing_ and yet more arousing — and slippery, just barely pressed against his arsehole. “You’re here to accept however I choose to touch you. You can make as much noise as you want, but remember this is my hole to play with.”

“Yes, John.” Sherlock is desperate to push back onto that finger. He must not. His hole is John’s now and this is the touch John has chosen to give him. He pants a little.

The finger slides in. “Please,” Sherlock says. The finger withdraws.
Sherlock yelps, protesting in spite of himself, and the sound of his protest is met with a slap that rocks him forward hard enough almost to lose his balance. He resettles himself, trying to convey through perfect stillness his acceptance of John’s use of him. The slapped place on his arse stings and then itches: another sensation that John is giving him and that it is his place to accept. At this point, it seems, nothing can happen without feeding directly into the condition of I-belong-to-John. The self-consciousness of a few minutes ago has mostly dissipated.

“There you go, that’s right.” The finger returns, enters, slides almost all the way out; Sherlock gasps and whimpers but holds himself still and does not, does not in any way argue or protest or complain; the finger slides back in, deeper. Then out. In; out; in; out; over and over, slow, relentless, unchanging, endless, while Sherlock concentrates all his will on not fucking back up onto the finger, not crying out an objection when it withdraws, again; again; again; his prick is leaking, heavy, drum-tight; lube drips between his arse cheeks and over his balls, tickling; he can hear the long continuous moan emerging from his own mouth but his mouth no longer seems to belong to him any more than his arse does or his prick does or his balls do; everything is John’s, John’s voice is warm and approving, and now the finger is gone again, the sound of the glove peeling off; next, there comes a different pressure, unyielding and slow, widening; the plug is not much thicker than John’s finger but it is longer, and, Sherlock thinks, curved. When it is seated, John bends over him and kisses the dip of his spine. “You’re lovely, you’re so good, I’m going to make this so good for you, just like you deserve, hush now.”

Sherlock hushes.

John’s hands, gentle, urge him onto his back and all the way onto the bed. Sherlock’s eyes have been closed for many minutes: he has been in a world of touch and sound alone. Now he watches John undress. John’s expression is lit with joy, possessive and dangerous. “You’ll hurt me,” Sherlock says: a statement of fact.

Slow curl of smile. “Yeah. Good?” Naked, John climbs over Sherlock and kneels back, making a seat of Sherlock’s pelvic girdle. With every shift of his weight, his arse pushes against Sherlock’s prick; inside Sherlock, the plug moves too, pressing forward and then back. John rubs his palm over Sherlock’s right nipple, then takes the nipple between thumb and forefinger.

Everything in Sherlock relaxes. “Yes, please” — and John twists, hard; Sherlock grabs at the blanket under him and throws his head back to make a high thin noise. John sets one hand over his neck, lightly, like a collar, and bends to lick the nipple; waits a moment for the spot to cool, sends breath over the coolness, then without a pause twists the other nipple and Sherlock’s whole torso bucks and he cries out, this time full-throated.

John bends, his mouth to Sherlock’s mouth, barely touching, and tugs at his nipples, not quite as hard this time, murmurs approvingly at the resulting “Oh!,” then twists again, making Sherlock shout. Kiss, tug, twist; kiss, tug, twist; kiss, tug, twist, until Sherlock gives up bucking and flinching and only gasps, loose under the pain. John rubs and kisses each nipple in turn, strokes Sherlock’s sides, reaches behind himself to run a finger along Sherlock’s prick. “I could do this all night,” he says, “listen to you make those noises. Make you make noises. The way you let me hurt you like this, just because I want to.”

“More,” Sherlock says, “more,” and words tumble out, words he has never said since Jim, words he has not permitted himself to think in years: “Please, I want you to, I want it to hurt, I like it, everything, yours, this is yours, use it — ”

“Oh God,” John says, bending to him again, kissing the side of his face, his neck, nipping, working his way down to Sherlock’s nipples and then biting, fast sharp bites that make Sherlock howl; “look
“at you, you’re fucking made for me, I want you to suck me, you want that? Up, on your knees.”

Sherlock waits, panting, while John settles himself against the headboard. “Greedy for my cock in your mouth, aren’t you, go on then, show me how much you want it. Get me good and wet, I like it slippery. And use your hands.”

Sherlock sets one hand on John’s thigh, the other on his belly, and pleasure is a trap for the unwary, because —

— there’s Jim, the first time Sherlock did this for him: Jim’s instructional voice *Lick the slit, not bad, now take the whole head in your mouth oh yes, you’re doing a good job for such a baby* the thread of contempt in every word as he urged Sherlock on —

Everything comes to a halt.

“John,” Sherlock says, “John. I want — only — ”

John winces in frustration, but his voice is gentle. “Cameo appearance by himself?”

How can John be so mild about this? Sherlock’s penis has already wilted and John’s seems to be following suit. For the second time this evening, Sherlock, the one who suggested they have sex to begin with, has had to stop the proceedings, and now because of Jim. Perhaps this is useless after all, perhaps he will always belong, in this part of himself, to Jim — but behind that feeling, and coming on fast, is fury. “I want to fellate you!” he cries. “I want to, you know it’s — it works with you, I can let all, all this happen” — meaning himself on his knees, the stinging skin of his arse and his nipples, the sweet relentless pressure of the plug — “and then I hear his voice — I can’t manage to delete it, why can’t I!”

When the silence has had a moment to ring with this, John says: “Come up here, will you?”

Sherlock is rigid with anger whose proper target is unavailable. Huffy and grimacing, he goes.

John’s arm wraps itself around Sherlock’s back. “Let me take out the plug.”

“No!” Sherlock nearly shouts. “Don’t you want to finish having sex?”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘finish.’ I’m more hoping to continue. I just don’t think it should be now.”

Sherlock clutches at his hair. “This is insupportable. I’ve got to, to drown him out somehow. Just do it. Make me. Run him off. Please, John.”

John takes a long time to consider this: long enough for the lube in Sherlock’s arse to get sticky, long enough for the plug to begin to feel absurd. Almost long enough for Sherlock to believe that John will refuse him.

“You’re sure,” John says finally.

“Yes.” *Get on with it.*

John nods. “All right, then. But. If this isn’t — if it’s not doing what you need it to do, you have to stop me. — And, Sherlock.”

Sherlock makes a noise, impatient.

“I trust you,” John says.
John surges up and slaps him.

The first blow lands square on Sherlock’s left nipple, the second on his right; again Sherlock notes an asymmetry in the impacts because John’s left arm is weaker, but John is hitting him fast and hard enough that Sherlock can’t really think about that right now, his nipples were already so sore from the earlier play, and then John grabs him by the hair and shoves him down —

*I trust you.*

Oh.

Sherlock has always thought of the trust necessary for — this — as going all in one direction.

John’s half hard again.

*I trust you.*

Sherlock breathes.

John’s legs are sprawled, his fingers knotted tight in Sherlock’s hair. He rubs Sherlock’s face over his crotch; Sherlock presses his tongue against whatever he can reach, balls, shaft, thighs. John lets go Sherlock’s hair and slaps his face, not hard. “Get to it.” Sherlock gets to it: he kisses the insides of John’s thighs, rubs his lips up and down his prick — *I like it slippery,* John had said, so Sherlock makes his mouth as wet as he can, licks into the slick-salt at John’s slit, sucks at the head, sets his hands at the insides of John’s thighs and with his thumbs strokes John’s perineum —

“Now suck. Hard. Take it all the way down. And get your arse in the air, I want to see it sticking up. Legs open like you did before. Anybody could see you like that, with the end of the plug sticking out. Like a cork in a bottle. Take the cork out and fuck you till you can’t sit down. That’s on my list for you, you know, whip you raw and then fuck you. You’ll like that.” John’s voice goes ragged; his hands find Sherlock’s head again, petting, tugging at his hair. *I trust you.* With his hands cupped around John’s balls, Sherlock sinks farther, sinks as far as he can, swallowing and drooling, as messy as he can make himself, pressing up with his tongue. He can hear himself producing sounds, little grunts and gasps and half-coughs — “Yeah,” John says, “that’s good, you sound — yeah, losing it like that — ” John’s hand is on the back of Sherlock’s head, pushing, not hard but steady, keeping Sherlock in place, *My mouth is for you to fuck, for you to come in,* Sherlock thinks, frantic with pleasure, *use it, use me, I’m yours, John, John, please,* his jaw aches; he looks up to see John’s face and shoulders flushed deep, *Close you’re so close,* John’s balls are tight in Sherlock’s hands and he rolls them and takes John’s cock in all the way, something Jim taught him, how to push past his gag reflex, dismay at this thought *but John’s is the only cock I’m ever going to suck again,* triumph, and John is throwing his head back now, saying “God, you’re so — you’re so — oh, fuck”; Sherlock swallows, coughs, hears himself whine, and as John softens in his mouth there is an awful surge of terror and shame *pour salt on a snail,* but John is up and on him and has rolled him over and kicked his legs apart and taken hold of his hair and kissed him before the awful feeling has time to wash him away.

“That was lovely,” John says, kissing him again and again, “you’re so good, you make me feel so good. And you haven’t come, that’s right, because you come when I let you and not before,” and Sherlock’s cock, which already feels crammed into a tight skin like a sausage, gives a little jump at this that makes John laugh into Sherlock’s neck.

“Hands at your sides,” John says. “You can grab the covers but don’t you dare move otherwise.” He
runs his hands, warm, all over Sherlock from his face to his toes, detouring down his arms and up again; he nips, but barely, at the tender skin where arm meets shoulder, where thigh meets hip. He kisses Sherlock’s knees between the braces’ hinges, disconcerting, best would be to ignore them, surely?; then he hoists Sherlock’s legs so that his arse is half in the air, and tsks. A pause while he fumbles for the lube, then the cool thick trickle down the back of Sherlock’s balls and toward his hole. John rocks the butt plug, pushes in, pulls out, the way he did with his finger earlier, wiggling it around till he finds Sherlock’s prostate, where he pushes ... pushes ... pushes, each push followed by a pinch to Sherlock’s foreskin that hurts enough to make Sherlock gasp and fight the impulse to press himself down and away from the pain.

John shifts over and up, so now it’s his thigh Sherlock feels rocking against the plug, and licks at Sherlock’s prick, softly; sensation ricochets between those two points of contact in infinite reflection and amplification. Sherlock makes wordless begging noises. “Oh,” John says, lifting his head, “I can’t make you wait too much longer. Whose are you, then? Look at me.”

Sherlock examined John’s demeanor, earlier. He looked at John’s cock before he began sucking it. But to look into John’s face, now, when John is watching him so nearly, when Sherlock is so undone, to see himself being seen like this, is almost unbearable. Sherlock hesitates.

“Now,” John says, sharp.

Sherlock opens his eyes.

John’s expression is serious. It is weighty. It is searching. It is brilliant with pride. The delight on John’s face is of a quality Sherlock could never mistake for any look of Jim’s, never, it produces in Sherlock a feeling as if he found himself aloft but with no idea what mechanism lifted him or kept him there. It’s frightening. Sherlock could no more keep himself from reaching for John than he could keep his circulatory system from exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide — he catches himself, because don’t you dare move; but John says, “Okay then, hang on,” and stretches out alongside him. Sherlock presses his face against John’s shoulder. The skin of his cheek distinguishes scar (smooth, hairless) from not-scar (warmer; spatter of vellus hair).

“No touch yourself. Slow at first. Like that, yeah,” and meanwhile John rocks the plug into Sherlock’s prostate, the same relentless repetition as before (I’m going to learn everything you like, Sherlock thinks, and this is high on your list, isn’t it), building on itself, brick by brick upward, upward; “Faster now,” John says, and now the rhythm is stroke stroke rock, stroke stroke rock higher, higher, and John has managed to situate that hand so as to swipe his wetted slippery thumb over Sherlock’s perineum while his fingers work the plug, his hand will cramp, “Ask me,” John says, and Sherlock replies, “Please, oh please — ” John nods and it’s enough, it’s enough, all he needed was permission and he is gasping into John’s mouth, shuddering, the hot sweetness piercing its way through and out of him, he becomes the feeling, wild and contained in John’s embrace.

* 

Two men, lulled by the sounds of traffic and late revelers, at ease and then profoundly asleep; both rouse slightly when one or the other stirs and their skins brush or come to rest together; then they fall away into the deep again, their even breaths a message sent and received, out and returning, out and returning: I’m here ... I’m here ... I’m here.

* 

Sherlock wakes around six. John’s asleep, with the covers most of the way over his head. He’s facing right, away from his wound. Sherlock slips out of bed, fetches his phone, and slides back under the duvet, making a tent with one elbow. He turns on the phone’s flashlight and holds it over
John’s bare shoulder. The LED is brighter than day; colder, too. The entry wound, Sherlock thought the first time he saw it, seemed incommensurate with the scale of the damage, a tale told more accurately by the scars left from the reconstructive surgery. Last night and this morning, he didn’t have or didn’t take the opportunity now afforded him for close study, so his best point of comparison is the memory of that first terrible night, after Guildford: going on two years ago, now. The tissue Sherlock remembers as a hot boiled pink is much faded, the marks of the surgical staples barely discernible even under the LED’s harsh light. The crater of the entry wound has paled too. But John’s left arm remains weaker than his right, as Sherlock felt, last night, with each right-left pair of slaps; and he has noticeably poorer fine motor control in his left hand. The deficiency shows in his script, serviceable but broad in its strokes and slow. Less glaring than what John does clumsily is what he doesn’t do at all: the great realm from which he’s forever barred. Does John simply avoid thinking about surgery? Sherlock has never asked.

Sherlock turns off the flashlight and settles on his back, close enough to John to enjoy the warmth of him and the comforting mild fug from sleep sweat and imperfectly cleaned-after sex. How do you bear it, John?

And, thinking of that first visit to Scotland Yard after Jim, of seeing every single person on the street as a conscript into the army of the ill and the injured: How does anyone bear anything?

John, drifting awake an hour later, mutters something contented-sounding and gives Sherlock a squeeze and a nuzzle before he gets up and points himself at the loo. The sight of his exit wound, also much faded from lurid pink, clarifies nothing.

* 

This morning is like the previous morning, in that exchanges Sherlock would have expected to find tedious, indeed that, objectively speaking, are tedious, prove to be pleasant and also to further his confidence — nearly complete at this point, anyway — in his hypothesis that the John and Sherlock who demand and beg, who give pain and pleasure and receive them, who humiliate and are humiliated, who undo each other and come undone, are comprised in the John and Sherlock who wear clothing, solve crimes, see patients, give admiration and receive it: who are themselves, only themselves, themselves complete.

That’s to say: As soon as the shower starts up, Sherlock needs to piss, desperately, so he barges into the loo without knocking and from behind the shower curtain John laughs at his sigh of relief; bladder blissfully empty, Sherlock extends an investigative tendril, to wit the sentence “I might perhaps leave a toothbrush here.”

John replies, “Medicine cabinet,” which when Sherlock opens it proves to hold a new toothbrush of his preferred type — “Oh,” he says in pleased surprise; John sticks his head out of the shower to wink at him and say, “I was feeling optimistic yesterday, picked that up for you on my way home,” which Sherlock had already worked out, of course, from the toothbrush’s presence, but hearing John say so is even better, and “Good lord,” he tells John, “you look like a carnival barker promising all the exotic delights of the Orient.”

“Brought to you by Transport for London: It’s Zone Three,” John intones, turning off the water, “where your imagination is no match for the — the ... I can’t go on, Sherlock, I need coffee if you’re hoping for more than four words strung together out of me.”

“That concluding sentence was twenty-one,” Sherlock points out, “or twenty-three, depending on how we count contractions.”

“We?” John says. “You go on and establish a policy, I’m making breakfast. — Wait, let me see
those” — meaning Sherlock’s nipples — “before you get in”: for Sherlock has reached to turn the shower back on. “I’ll put plasters on before you dress, otherwise your shirt will be chafing you all day.”

Now that Sherlock’s not preoccupied with inquiries of one sort or another he discovers that John’s right, he’s going to want plasters: even the water running over his nipples is enough to make him grit his teeth. Having showered and, gingerly, patted himself dry, Sherlock filches a pair of John’s pants. These also make him grit his teeth, though for a different reason: they spoil the line of his trousers. He wears them anyway. He’ll stop at Baker Street for a change of clothes before he heads for Dulwich, and then, pleasing thought, the pants will be there for John to dress in the next time he’s at Baker Street of a morning.

He finds John’s supply of plasters and takes two, meaning to apply them himself, then changes his mind, which turns out to be a good decision because John puts them on with such delicacy that Sherlock barely feels it. By the time he has drunk a cup of coffee and kissed John goodbye he has all but forgotten them; but, dressing again at home, he catches sight of them.

He stares into the mirror for a long time. Sticking plasters. Such small things. Sherlock’s eyes prickle; he touches one of the plasters with two fingers and presses down till he can feel the soreness underneath, then cups his palm over the sore spot to let the warmth ease it.
Transports

Chapter Summary

It’s one thing to risk arrest or a beating for himself — or even for John, who would gladly face the danger — another to jeopardize the case.

Chapter Notes

This is it! Thank you to everyone who has read, commented, kudosed, or taken a look and then run away in horror because this just isn’t your jam. TSylvestris and Chryse, thank you both from the bottom of my heart for reading, offering suggestions, helping me work through plot points, giving me hot tips on dialysis ports that I wound up not even using, listening to me complain about how long this was taking me, etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. I don’t think I’m done yet with the et ceteras.

S.: like pretty much everything else, this is for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

No one’s home at the pleasant we-have-money,-yes,-but-we-don’t-care-for-ostentation house in Dulwich. Well, Sherlock thinks with satisfaction, at least Lestrade needn’t worry about his getting caught breaking into the Portenoys’ nonexistent garage — not that Sherlock has any inclination to be caught breaking into anything. He disables the security system by the simple expedient of tripping it (motion sensor set off by attempting to push up a side window: yawn) and drifting off to a café for half an hour to give the security company time to investigate the alarm, which is to all appearances false, which makes them slow to respond when the alarm goes off again because Sherlock has picked the lock on the back door after they left. Sherlock finds the power source — predictably, it’s in the laundry room — and shuts it down. The security company cultivates its garden elsewhere. All very relaxing, really; now for data.

Data data data. Two laptops, his and hers MacBook Pros signaling their owners’ membership in the ersatz nonconformist demographic; Sherlock rolls his eyes. He has deleted “Think different” a hundred times if he’s deleted it once, only to have it insert itself into his brain again two days later via yet another self-satisfied advert. Both laptops are password protected — refreshing really, an alarm system and this, people who actually attempt to throw up obstacles to investigation; only, the piece of paper on which all the household passwords are neatly printed out is pinned to a corkboard in the kitchen. Sherlock pockets the list but decides to hold off on seeing what treasures the laptops may hold until he’s had a proper look about the place.

This turns out to be his second excellent decision today, as he learns when he opens the medicine cabinet in the master bathroom. Tacrolimus. Prednisolone. Deximune. Mycophenolate. All prescribed to Martine Portenoy. ... Oh. But to double-check, he sends John a photo of the bottles.

The reply is immediate:

she’s had a transplant
And, a moment later:

*fuck! that was a kidney she got, i’ll bet anything*

And then:

*you mad bastard, be careful*

*Settle for clever?* Sherlock texts back.

Gets in return:

*try both.*

*text me when you’re out, will you?*

Really, by now it shouldn’t surprise Sherlock how much this pleases him.

*All right. SH*

On to Martine Portenoy’s laptop, then: she has bookmarked half a dozen sites providing advice to prospective and recent recipients of a kidney transplant. And the homepage of a luxurious transplant-tourist clinic in Istanbul.

It can’t be.

Well, no, on reflection it probably can’t: that Dulwich’s connection to Jim should be a transplant clinic in Istanbul is, almost, predictable. But the Istanbul Kidney Center claims to perform hundreds of transplants every year; that the original owner of the kidney now lodged within Martine Portenoy should happen to be a man who died in a lorry abandoned on a patch of waste ground off the M20 shortly after her surgery, *that* would be too much of a coincidence.

Not that Sherlock can’t use the idea. Mrs. Portenoy is more than halfway to believing it already, if her demolished garage is saying what Sherlock thinks it says about her emotional state. Horror and guilt are such useful motivators.

He boots up Martine Portenoy’s laptop, logs into her email (the password is her street address, for God’s sake, so the list from the kitchen corkboard, while convenient, saves him no more than a minute or two), takes her mobile number from an O2 bill, and logs into Find My iPhone. Mrs. Portenoy is just six miles from 39 Waltham Grove: an ideal distance, long enough on thirty-mile-an-hour streets for her to work herself up, not long enough for her to start thinking clearly about what reinforcements she might call in as she bolts for home. Sherlock sends a text, leaving off his initials:

*I believe we should talk about your kidney.*

He expects no reply, and there isn’t one. He locks her phone, just in case she’s a quicker study than the evidence so far suggests. Then a thought strikes him: *Extra leverage.* He emails martine.portenoy.1972@gmail.com a photo and saves it to her hard drive, then opens it to fill her screen. The Yard’s cameras are good ones and the resolution is superb; now, would it be better to show Mrs. Portenoy the whole tableau, or to select a telling detail? Sherlock opts for the whole tableau, which will make the photo’s relevance immediately obvious to her. He has just settled comfortably in an armchair when her key turns in the lock.

“Hello,” Sherlock says, in his pleasantest tones. “Won’t you sit down?”
She does, abruptly. Her mouth is opening and closing. The Boden dress in an enormous floral print is perhaps a bit on the young side, though its Empire waist does flatter.

In the perfect ergonomic armchair, Sherlock tilts his head and sorts through the dozen acid remarks he could open with —

— and Jim was a spider, poised in the center of his immense cold industrial space, Thames views, awaiting the entrance of his sick and frightened prey ... “Hello, sexy. Take a seat.”

Martine Portenoy is not quite a victim here.

Martine Portenoy can’t bear the sight of the garage where Gerald Campion was killed.

Sherlock gets up and deletes the photo of the corpses in the lorry from her hard drive. “The people who supplied your kidney also have a line in murdered refugees. You know that already. Help me bring them down,” he says.

* 

Her hands are shaking but she manages to put on the kettle for tea. Or “tea,” that is: she offers half a dozen kinds of herbal rubbish. Sherlock wrinkles his nose and rummages in the cupboard till he finds a dusty box of Twining’s orange pekoe. “I’ve broken into your house and hijacked your laptop and your mobile,” he points out, for she appears to be taken aback. “It’s hardly a stretch to look through your selection of dried leaves.”

“Yes,” she says, “I suppose you’re right.” She is looking anywhere but at Sherlock; when the kettle clicks off, she jumps.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Give me that.” He won’t get much out of her if she scalds herself pouring, after all.

“What do you need to know?” she asks when they’re seated.

“Everything that I haven’t already worked out. Mostly, how you came by the kidney.”

Mrs. Portenoy’s hands are tucked into her armpits. “My kidney,” she says.

“There’s nothing left of the UK end of the operation,” Sherlock says, in case she needs the reassurance. “It was Moriarty, and Campion, probably also his wife, and, at the very bottom end of things, the lorry driver. Maybe a few more persons such as yourself, not direct participants but sufficiently compromised to be useful in that enterprise or some other. I don’t know where the refugees’ money and the kidney buyers’ money wind up, now that James Moriarty’s dead. But I do know where the money starts. It starts where the refugees and their kidneys and the kidneys’ buyers are, and that place is a transplant clinic in Istanbul with at least one dubiously ethical surgeon on its staff. I presume the clinic is the one bookmarked on your laptop. Start by telling me how you found it. And then everything else you know about the place.”

“Jesus,” she says. And, on an intake of breath: “You’re the one Mr. Moriarty had those pictures of.”

Sherlock’s face grows hot; of course, for someone in Martine Portenoy’s position that episode would remain close to the forefront of the mind. She won’t actually have seen the photographs, he reminds himself, only read and heard careful allusions to what they showed. And: Mr. Moriarty! After a moment, he says, “Yes, I am. Now tell me how you met him.”

Mrs. Portenoy’s expression denotes the wish to push back, but it’s only half-hearted and she soon
gives it up. “Just — luck, I guess you’d say. Oliver and I were at an art opening. Damien Hirst.”

Having no idea who this is, Sherlock adopts an expression of polite interest.

“Well, all those bodies of *animals*, you see” — Sherlock makes a mental note to look up this Hirst fellow’s work; does he take an interest in crime? — “and a friend of ours has a heart valve from a pig, and so naturally the subject of transplantation came up. The waiting list for a kidney ... And I was already on dialysis. Mr. Moriarty overheard the conversation, I suppose. He introduced himself. He was so apologetic, so polite. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop. He said he hadn’t meant to, anyway, but now ... I don’t know.”

It’s more than conceivable, Sherlock thinks, that Jim really was there for the art. Art with dead bodies in it would suit him, though his reasons for admiring it might differ from most critics’. He doesn’t say this to Mrs. Portenoy, though, only “And?”

“And he said he just happened to know an excellent surgeon who had access to a pool of living donors. At a state-of-the-art facility in Istanbul. Would Oliver and I like his contact information?

“So of course we said yes. Anyone would say yes.”

The inevitable self-exoneration.

*John wouldn’t say yes.* John would not buy an organ from a person who needed money and had nothing else to sell, any more than he would shoot a prisoner of war or enter into a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old. He would not buy a kidney from a refugee, not even if it was all that stood between him and death.

This also, Sherlock doesn’t say to Mrs. Portenoy. “Do go on, please.”

On the way back to Baker Street, Sherlock works out plans, chewing his lip. Once he's interviewed Margaret Campion, he and John will go to Istanbul, posing as a rich businessman with recently failed kidneys, and the rich businessman’s personal physician, who travels with him. Together they will visit the director of the Istanbul Kidney Center. Once financial arrangements are concluded, the medically squeamish Mr. Sigerson will excuse himself so that Dr. Hamish Calhoun can discuss with Dr. Adnan Hazinedar the particulars of Sigerson’s history. During that conversation, Sherlock will suss out the security precautions at the Kidney Center so that he and John can pay an overnight call to obtain the data that will incriminate Hazinedar as a buyer of organs —

He has the medical history in mind, from a case report he found in the *Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine* and has been saving for a special occasion. It describes a man whose kidneys failed after an attack by a swarm of wasps, and it’s perfect, because it will account for Sigerson’s having lost kidney function suddenly and therefore not having the usual dialysis port in his arm.

Pack a bag, book tickets, book a room at the Çelebi Palace, maybe that high suite overlooking the Bosphorus, the one with the loo that could double as a hammam — Sherlock puts that distracting thought aside.

SH to JW, 15:43

*Cancel your appointments for tomorrow. Take a week’s leave. We’re going to Istanbul.*

Backspace. Backspace backspace backspace backspace backspace backspace backspace backspace backspace
The case is concluded. SH

Carefully, Sherlock places his phone on the kitchen table. He covers his mouth with one hand and then sets the other hand over it too. He stands up. His head is swimming.

His phone pings: that will be John, congratulating him. Sherlock ignores it.

He knows Istanbul reasonably well, and anyway that’s what Google Maps is for. His Turkish is scant, but not so scant that with a dictionary’s help he would be unable to decipher medical records and financial spreadsheets. As for communicating with Adnan Hazinedar, the surgeon did a fellowship in Edinburgh, and Martine Portenoy reports that his English is impeccable.

But Sherlock can’t run or fight, and he has had a pneumothorax as proof. To climb a flight or two up a fire escape is as much as he could manage these days, and that if he were well rested. He cannot follow a suspect on foot for mile on mile. It is more than possible that to investigate the kidney sales will call on physical resources that he no longer has. And it’s one thing to risk arrest or a beating for himself — or even for John, who would gladly face the danger — another to jeopardize the case. If Sherlock wants Jim Moriarty’s legacy destroyed, he will have to step aside and provide someone else with the means to do it.

He knows a few people at the EU liaison office of Interpol. He makes up a packet with Molly’s thumb drive, the records of the investigation into the murders of the Syrian refugee family, and his notes from the interviews with Frank Hindemith and Martine Portenoy. Tomorrow he’ll visit the lorry garage and interview Margaret Campion; then he can express the packet to Brussels.

So his part will be done.

Sherlock folds himself up on the couch, where he tries to think of nothing, and fails. Very small and already weak. His hands rest on his knees and at first he doesn’t move. They smothered her to spare her further suffering. Then he clasps his hands and rests his chin on them. That isn’t what he wants; it’s all wrong. One water bottle with the label off. Sherlock wants a weight in his hands. No. He wanted, he wanted, to be the one to lay hands on the surgeon, he wanted to overpower him, to give him to the police, to preside over his destruction. He would have thrust the van photographs into the surgeon’s face and made him look and look and look at the dead women and the dead men and the dead infant who one of them had to steel himself, herself to smother —

There’s a forensics text right in front of him; Sherlock picks it up, hefts it, feels satisfied for a moment, and then rage roars up in him and he throws the text at the wall, wanting to make the wall shudder, but it doesn’t shudder, the book hits pages-first making a weak smack-flap that fails to appease him in the slightest. There is a vase: that’ll do better.

The vase shatters, yes, but it’s not heavy enough for the impact to reverberate the way Sherlock needs it to. He heads for the kitchen. His microscope is on the table there but he forces his gaze away from it because there’s still a corner of his mind not as far gone as all that; he reaches for the first heavy pot he sees, which bounces off the wall and Sherlock can see the dent it made in the plaster, very well as far as it goes, but the bounce was annoying, what he wants is to smash things and see them lie still, he wants something to lie still and be dead, even if it’s dead already.

He isn’t making sense even to himself.

He doesn’t care. He begins throwing crockery. Better. Fragments accumulate at the base of the wall, scree outward. The mathematics of impact. The mathematics of flight. The mathematics of
growth and decay. He throws a mirror. Another vase. A cast-iron pan that was under the sink for reasons he can no longer remember. He starts back on the books, picking the heaviest ones and throwing them from close to the wall so that, with no time to splay in flight, they thud appropriately. Physics, all physics. It is all describable. If he had the right terms. If he could calculate.

Smash, thud. Crash.

Slam.

That was the front door of the flat. Panting, Sherlock turns from the heap of crockery and broken-backed books to see Mrs. Hudson stood in the doorway so appalled that she hasn’t even managed to bring her hand all the way to her mouth. “Out,” he says, “get out.”

Mrs. Hudson ignores this. If she were anyone else, Sherlock would throw crockery at her to encourage her swift departure. But she was married to Stanley Hudson and has had considerable experience with household objects being thrown at her, so that avenue is closed to Sherlock. He looks away.

Mrs. Hudson sighs.

“It’s a case,” Sherlock admits. “The. The people in the van. I wanted to ... But I can’t. Physically.” The last word proves difficult to say.

Mrs. Hudson looks sad. She nods: she has been expecting this day, Sherlock sees. When she speaks her voice is gentle and there is no rebuke in it. “You haven’t smashed your violin?”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“Nor your microscope, either, I see. Good.” She pauses. “It was all to do with Jim, those poor people, and you wanted to fix it, am I right?”

He presses his lips together.

“Yes. And will someone else be able to do that, now? For them?”

Sherlock indicates the package that tomorrow or the next day will be ready for Interpol.

“And they’ll finish this.”

Grudgingly: “Yes.”

“The way the state of Florida finished Stanley.” Mrs. Hudson’s tone is pointed.

Sherlock says nothing.

“Don’t you see, dear, it was you who got me free of him. You didn’t have to arrest him yourself, or try him, or put on a warden’s uniform and pull a switch. There wasn’t any need for that, once you’d been clever and really looked.”

Sherlock looks at the floor.

“I know it’s not the same, your legs. But think on it. I know you. You’ve done everything you can for those poor murdered people, and now someone else will be able to do the rest. Because you made it possible. It’s all right, Sherlock. Really it is.”

Sherlock cannot speak.
Mrs. Hudson kisses his cheek and pats his arm. “— Now, is John coming by this evening? Good. Mind, you’ll have to pay for the damage to the wall, dear. Your crockery’s your own lookout. Keep your shoes on till you’ve cleaned up, you know cuts on the feet take forever to heal.”

*

After Mrs. Hudson leaves, Sherlock unearths his Kevlar gloves and handful by handful he scoops the shards into a cardboard box. Then he sweeps the rest. It’s been a long day and his legs are wobbly by the time he’s done. He texts John:

*I’m turning the case over to Interpol. SH*

There’s no reply for ten minutes: John is either with a patient, or laboriously adding two and two. Then:

*because of your legs?*

*Yes. SH*

And, because he can’t help himself:

*They will be able to coordinate with the Turkish police to complete the investigation. SH*

Which gets back, almost instantly:

*You’d never turn it over to them, otherwise.*

Sherlock reads this twice, blinking.

Capitalized and punctuated, when John doesn't normally bother; so he's making a statement. One about Sherlock, that he means Sherlock to take in.

Sherlock remembers, suddenly, the long-ago conversation with the neurologist: “The thing is, your symptoms are a perfect fit for postpolio syndrome. If, that is — ” ... and texting Dr. Banerjee, and when she rang back, her dismayed voice, flattened by the mobile connection. One friend, an ocean away.

He had, otherwise, been alone — in retrospect, he has already had to admit, he was mistaken about that, because even then there had been Mrs. Hudson, and Lestrade, though he had not fully appreciated their ... sentiments; in any case, he had believed himself to be alone. He had acknowledged an exception for Sarita Banerjee, and that only *because* she was an ocean away.

*It’s a fatal mistake to theorize when you don’t have all the evidence.*

Or when you’re ignoring some of it. When, say, you wish to mount a prosecution, to put an end to a dangerous uncertainty, to punish *someone*, anyone, and so you neglect to account for whatever may alter the picture you have made.

He has falsified nothing: that much credit he can grant himself. The picture he made does comprise facts — many facts — only, not all the facts. *It is curious, is it not,* Sarita had written, *that circumstances conspired to give you a view of human behavior so exactly like James Moriarty’s?* Jim had seemed to confirm what Sherlock already suspected: that the human world would always use him against himself, that love was only a screen for betrayal, that to want and to hope were weaknesses. Anyone seeing them would see, first and always, the means to leave Sherlock in ruins.
Alone was safe; as safe as it was possible to be. It was apart, and better: more clever, more
competent, remote from the irrationalities and the storms of grief and rage and want and love,
especially love, by which dull tedious ordinary people were brought to cheat, to kill, to weep.
Everything Sherlock had escaped, when he escaped Jim and cocaine and made himself into a
consulting detective.

Alone will not protect him from the crutches he’ll soon need. Alone will not undo the weakness of
his legs.

Ever since Jim shot himself, Sherlock has been in a condition of perpetual surprise. All the cruelties
he expected had shown themselves, but so had other things. He has noted them, he has reported on
them to Sarita, he has even acted on them — with John, with Lestrade, with Sally Donovan; with
Mrs. Hudson, just now, when he told her the truth about why he was breaking all his plates. But the
implications —

Lestrade making sure all the photos of Sherlock were wiped. Mrs. Hudson getting rid of the
reporters. John staying, and staying, and staying.

Callum Wolfe, who came to see Sherlock, to thank him. Who thought Sherlock had done the right
thing in not killing Jim. Who seemed to think of Sherlock as — as good.

There was a man he never saw, North London man of Pakistani origin, who asked him whether he
was all right and told him to take care.

The sympathetic and embarrassed faces in the lobby of the Yard. Which Sherlock did see.

And — and before, even. He had been — grateful, he supposes, for Lestrade’s help after his arrests,
for Sarita’s taking him in so he could quit the cocaine; but he had never permitted himself to notice
the significance of what they did. His devotion to his theory was too great.

Alone has never protected him from love or grief. In fact —

— it’s the other way round. Love and grief are what protect him. They protect him from —

He belongs to the world of the lame and the halt and those in every other way damaged. He had
never left it. He was never safe, never apart, and now he’s angry and frightened and tired, and also
he is in love, and now he sees, he sees all the evidence, and the picture has changed. Not only was
he never really apart; he has never wanted to be —

— love and grief are what protect him from being alone.

Sarita, Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson, Molly, Sally, John. John. Sherlock once thought he had a fortress, but
the fortress has utterly failed him, and — look — he never needed it: others have built a palisade
around him. He has been protected, trusted, offered kindnesses when he did not know how to accept
them, and then he has been offered kindnesses again. He has been offered love.

Everything is not fine. He isn’t what he was. His legs are getting worse. He doesn’t yet know what
he can find to make up the lost pieces of the Work. And yet.

Jim was wrong. Jim is dead and Sherlock is alive and Sherlock is in love and Sherlock has friends
and Jim was wrong.

He feels dislocated, as though he has been picked up and turned in the air and then set down again to
find that every table and window, every plate and microscope, every mirror and staircase — every
possible thing in this familiar world — looks and sounds and smells and tastes just as it did formerly,
and yet each meaning is new.

He opens the door of the flat and shouts down the stairs. “Mrs. Hudson! Mrs. Hudson, I’m sorry about your wall!”

A key turns in the lock of the street door. Sherlock smells pad thai.

“John!” he says, gladness soaring out of him. “You’re here.”

“What’s that about the wall and Mrs. Hudson?” John asks. He is looking up at Sherlock with his face full of joy: full of joy because he sees Sherlock, and it’s in this moment that Sherlock understands, in his breath, in his heart, down to his bones, down to his veins and arteries, down to his last doubting molecule, in every twitch of a muscle fiber, in each leap from axon to dendrite, that he, himself, Sherlock Holmes, is the desire of John Watson’s heart, his one true love, his own.

John has reached the top of the stairs and set down the carrier bag; then he stops short, having caught sight of the box of broken crockery and books. "Er." He looks back and forth between it and Sherlock. "The case, of course. I should’ve realized ... Are you okay?"

*I don't know,* Sherlock thinks, *what comes next. But something does, and it'll be interesting to find out.*

"Strangely enough," he replies, "yes."

*

How odd it is, how unfamiliar, how miraculous, to be human.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

The case Sherlock planned to use for the Istanbul investigation is Hemachandar Radhakrishnan, [Acute kidney injury and rhabdomyolysis due to multiple wasp stings](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3608843/), *Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine*, July 2014 (18[7]), pp. 470—472.

I had in mind a longish epilogue, but now that I'm working on it I see that what I want to accomplish may not take as many words as I thought at first. Which is a good thing, because my next couple of weeks are busy ones and I write at a stately pace anyway, so I can't quite say when it'll post. Though it surely won't be as long as three and a half years from now!
Coda: A Reciprocal Relationship

Chapter Summary

The certificate meant *This is what once was. See how puny you were. See how easily duped.*

Chapter Notes

This epilogue depends pretty much entirely on events described in Part 1, "Curriculum Vitae." I don't think it'll make emotional sense if you haven't read that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John’s lease will be expiring in mid-autumn, and Sherlock means to ask him to move in. John already has a mug in the kitchen, a drawer in the chest, and a space in the wardrobe; there are always two towels hanging in the loo; the chair with the Union Jack pillow is his.

However, one wishes to apply as many enticements as possible to such an offer, so Sherlock decides to make the bedroom more emphatically Sherlock-and-John’s by relocating some of his own things to the untenanted room upstairs. The various outfits he’s accumulated for use in disguise, for example, and which, he acknowledges with a pang, may belong to a portion of his career that is mostly past now.

He should move the certificate upstairs, too. It’s been stood with its face to the wall for years now; Sherlock has never been able to bring himself to dispose of it, or has pretended to himself that he had forgotten it. Certainly he no longer saw it. Or not consciously. Or not that he would admit.

There’s a line of dust along the top of the frame. Sherlock frowns at it and wipes his fingers on a rag, then uses the rag to clean the top and sides of the frame, still without picking it up.

He bites his lip. He’s being ridiculous.

With rather more vigor than someone watching might deem necessary, Sherlock picks up the certificate, sits on the bed, and turns the certificate over so that its face is visible.

∞ AWARD ∞

Sherlock fishes around on the bed next to him where he has put the rag; his gaze doesn’t move from the certificate. He cleans off the glass, sets the rag down again, and reads.
Given this day of 6 January 1982
to
Mr. Sherlock Holmes
for his
remarkable achievements in the care and training
of the experimental subject known as
SILVANUS

That was Sherlock’s seventh birthday.

The points of the starry blue foil seal at the bottom right of the certificate have bent, many of them.

Sherlock had taken the certificate with him when he left home — or what passed for home, at that point — for Cambridge. He was going room by room through the house looking for useful articles and there was the certificate, hanging on the wall of what had been Anna’s library. The air in the library was close and smelled of drunk Robert. The certificate meant This is what once was. See how puny you were. See how easily duped. The contempt Sherlock had felt then, for that former self of his, full of pride and enthusiasm because his older brother pretended to be impressed by his training of a rat — that was something to grip on to, that feeling. The certificate was a salutary reminder of what not to be, what not to do. He put it at the top of a box he had otherwise filled with Anna’s books.

At some point during Sherlock’s bad romance with cocaine, the certificate and its frame had parted ways. He had bartered the frame, or sold it; it had been a good one, of satinwood with ebony inlaid around the outer and inner borders. Sherlock at seven didn’t know to notice that, but Mycroft at fifteen did, and so did Sherlock at twenty-two or twenty-three, or whichever year that had been. He doesn’t remember, though, how much cocaine it got him, or from whom, or where he was living where he injected it, or which vein he used.

Anyway, the frame was gone.

The certificate he had folded into quarters and kept with the passport he also somehow managed never to lose, even after he had lost his violin bow and his mother’s books. It had portability in its favor; there was that. He never even needed to unfold it: a touch of the heavy rag paper, like butter cream, was enough to remind him of the certificate’s meaning. See how puny. How easily duped.

Along with the certificate, Mycroft had supplied an array of items for Silvanus to climb, tunnel through, chew. Silvanus had hesitated to climb the ladder when Sherlock stood it straight upright for him, but Mycroft tutted and said, “Try this” — setting the ladder horizontal but propping up one end to create a mild slope. Along this Silvanus had run without hesitation, in exchange for a sunflower seed. Sherlock grasped at once the principle: present a trick—task in its simplest form first, make it
more difficult by slow degrees. “Thus your subject will learn most easily in the long run,” Mycroft had agreed. Sherlock applied the principle at once to a number of — tasks set for Silvanus.

It was, he reflects now, a version of the same method that Jim later used on him.

Only: Silvanus never once flinched from Sherlock’s hand.

Silvanus used to nap in the crook of Sherlock’s arm while Sherlock read, turning pages with the other hand so as not to disturb him. Even now, Sherlock can recall the sensation of that warm trusting bundle against his skin. He wouldn’t have called it trusting, then; would have insisted that “trust” was not a scientific term.

Nevertheless, it seems correct to say that Silvanus trusted him.

The quarter-folded certificate accompanied Sherlock to New York City, and then to Miami, and then to London once more, where, as he was no longer spending on cocaine every pound he could find or steal, he began to keep things. Books, again; a new microscope; and, once Mrs. Hudson bought the place on Baker Street and invited him to live as her tenant again, furniture. Linens. The crockery he has just recently had to replace.

He didn’t buy the frame the certificate’s now in, however; that, he found on the street. Cheap, intact in its plastic wrapper. Sherlock had been working with Lestrade for a couple of years at that point; he had looked at specimens on several occasions, with Molly. Perhaps he sensed the lesson of the certificate slipping away, even then, for when he saw the frame placed next to a skip — it was in Islington, just outside the Angel tube stop — he knew at once what he wanted it for. He had abandoned whatever errand he was on to bring it home.

He had set the certificate in the frame carelessly: it lies at an angle, the upper right and lower left corners bent behind the chipboard backing. The acid in the chipboard must be doing dreadful things to that gorgeous paper. Sherlock snaps open the clips that hold the backing in place and pulls out the certificate. He can’t tell to what extent the paper is degraded, but he doesn’t like to replace the certificate with the chipboard touching it. He has an edition of some nineteenth-century forensic photographs printed in folio size and he lays the certificate over the tissue that protects the title page and puts the book away. He discards the frame.

*  

Mycroft had had the certificate made by a letterpress printer on fine paper and had placed it in a satinwood frame with ebony inlays and given it to Sherlock for his seventh birthday. It was more than a little ridiculous, really; but Mycroft wore suits with waistcoats and used sock garters at fifteen. He carried a brass-topped cane. Sherlock cannot think of any friends’ names Mycroft mentioned, until Jim.

*  

In November, John moves in. Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, Molly, Donovan, and Dimmock come round for drinks; Sarita gets on Skype and insults them all from Sherlock’s laptop because they’re drunk. Her wedding is in two weeks.

*  

In January, Sherlock will turn forty. He doesn’t like the forearm crutches, but at least so far he can get away with using them only at the end of a long day, and John insists they make him look like someone injured in the course of perilous adventures and therefore dashing, as in the nineteenth
century a dueling scar might have done. It’s nonsense, but it makes Sherlock feel a little better to hear it, especially if John has put nipple clamps on him and is fucking him at the time.

*

When Sherlock was fourteen, Mycroft was twenty-two. It seemed a great age to Sherlock then, entailing wisdom and experience. An age at which a parentless, lonely, and peculiar man’s betrayal of his brother would be an unforgivable thing.

*

That was how twenty-two seemed then, from the perspective of fourteen.

*

It’s not easy to work out what to say in a letter, and finally Sherlock gives up the attempt. He would have liked to walk, but the two miles would have been a challenge without his crutches, so in the end he takes the tube to Piccadilly; his destination isn’t far from there.

*

The man who is the British government does have a little brother, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I thought this little coda would take me forever, but here it is, with snickers & smooches directed toward anyone who wondered why I hadn’t tied up those Mycroft-related loose ends.

Works inspired by this one

Cover Art for ancientreader's "The Beginning of Knowledge" by fiorinda_chancellor

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