Dust and Ashes

by Atiki

Summary

John becomes used to it. If he’s perfectly honest with himself, he’s become used to it a long time ago. At night, things are different. The darkness tickles his skin and the cemetery is the loudest place in the world and he tastes dust and iron on his tongue when he hears them talk. In the dark, the bones whisper.

And sometimes John whispers back.

Notes

please heed the tags and don't read if you don't like slightly macabre gothic low-key horror (?) ... stuff. there are scenes in this fic that might be upsetting, especially if you're sensitive to pet death and suicidal thoughts, other than that it's just plain weird? thanks. ♥

The cemetery whispers in the dark.

He cries the first time he hears then. A multitude of voices, some of them friendly, others malevolent, agitated, frightening. The noise is muffled by earth and mud and decaying wood and heavy grave stones that cover the dead underneath them like a dirty blanket.
John doesn’t understand any of this, of course. He’s too young, too clueless, too afraid. The voices crawl under his skin. He feels cold on the inside.

His mother pushes the pram a little faster, away from the cemetery, away from the voices. She talks soothingly to him until he stops screaming. He bites his lip until it hurts.

The whispering cemetery becomes John’s earliest memory.

He never forgets.

When John is four, his parents buy a cat for Harry. Her name is Suzy and she’s white as snow and she meows in front of the door when she wants to go out for a hunt. Suzy is a skilled hunter.

When John is five, Harry’s cat gets hit by a car. She’s dead when they find her. Harry screams and cries and nearly chokes on her own tears when she sees her like that. The soft, white fur red with blood; lifeless, half-open eyes staring up at them.

Dad buries the cat in the garden, under the oak tree. Harry crafts a little gravestone and writes Suzy’s name on it. It’s made of cardboard and turns into mud in the rain within a day.

Harry forgets and learns to laugh again. Eventually.

The grave is silent for about six months. Then, when nature has taken care of the mortal shell around them, the bones wake up at night.

The first time John hears it, he thinks it’s the wind.

The second time he tells himself it’s the wind, *it’s the wind*, until he stops trembling.

The third time he hopes he’s dreaming.

The fourth time he jumps in his parents’ bed and tells them that Harry’s cat is screaming for him. That he hears her every night.

They tell him to stop lying and send him back to bed.
The fifth time John hears the cat in the garden, he jumps out of bed, nicks Dad’s old flashlight from the drawer in the kitchen and the big shovel from the garden shed, and he digs.

He’s not sure what he expects, but what he finds makes his heart beat in his throat and his mouth drop open in a silent cry.

Harry’s cat is no longer there, no longer whole. All that’s left are dirty bones, a skeleton in the dust. Ribs thin as needles, a skull that looks like it’s sculpted out of porcelain, the spine a snow white pearl necklace in the dirt. It’s dead and stone-still, and it’s hissing and mewling and John brushes the mud and dust away with both hands to set it free.

The skeleton purrs when it can see the night sky again.

John kneels on the ground, wipes his dirty hands on the pyjama trousers he’s still wearing. He stares down at the clean bones that have kept him awake and waits.

His parents find him in the garden at four in the morning, covered in mud, kneeling front of an open grave with a cat’s skeleton.

His father picks him up and scolds him, carries him to the bathroom to get him clean. His mother shakes her head and stares at the hole in the ground as if she’s about to be sick. John is terribly tired, so he crawls into bed and sleeps until early afternoon. The grave is no longer open when he checks. The shovel is gone, too. Dad doesn’t want Harry to get frightened.

It’s silent now, under the fresh mud and stones and earth that cover the bones. It’s daytime. The bones are asleep.

“You need to know that everyone has a sixth sense,” Grandma whispers.

John’s tiny left hand tingles under her callused palm. Grandma is in bed, wrapped in six patchwork blankets. She always is, these days, because she’s tired and so very cold. Mum and Harry cry about that a lot and John is not sure why. Grandma smiles at John, she’s always done that, and her hands are cold and dry and her eyes sparkle. John bites his lip and smiles back, because Grandma likes to see him smile.

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“You need to know that everyone has a sixth sense,” Grandma says, “it’s a talent, Johnny. It’s a good thing. You have to protect it. You need to take care of yourself.”

John nods. He doesn’t really understand, but he wants to be the smart boy Grandma is proud of, so
he pretends.

John doesn’t tell them that he can hear them talk. He never speaks to his bones, he just listens. He doesn’t trust this abominable skill nature has given him.

They know, anyway. They know he can hear them.

The dead dog’s bones that are buried under the bridge bark at him when he walks past them. The jaw bone on the teacher’s desk in biology class tells Mr Wallace to shut his mouth when he talks about the gastrointestinal system. John presses his lips together and tries not to listen.

But sometimes, just sometimes, the jaw bone’s snide comments make him smile.

He still hears Harry’s cat at night, the hissing and meowing still audible under the soil and grass that cover its bones. It sounds accusing. John knows the skeleton dislikes him. It’s trying to tell him that he has failed. It’s impossibly loud, too, but maybe he’s just imagining that. Maybe he’s imagining everything, maybe he’s just completely and utterly insane and there’s nothing wrong with him after all. (He does realise that this is a contradiction, but then, his entire life is. He is.)

He buries his face in his pillow, covers his ears with his hands and tries to sleep.

Grandma’s funeral is on a Saturday. In the early afternoon. In broad daylight. The buried bones don’t whisper or hiss or hum or cry for help. They’re sound asleep, John imagines, in the cold ground, covered in dirt. Like Grandma. John hopes they wrapped six blankets around her before they buried her, so she’s warm.
Mum hands him a tissue and helps him wipe his tears away.

The bones of a woman lie right under the bus station. John listens to their stories before school, provided that it’s still dark when he’s waiting for the bus.

The woman’s name was Violet and her bones have been lying here for over fifty years.

Violet’s voice is beautiful, deep and velvety, and she says her husband brought her here to put her to rest. Long before the bus station was built, obviously. She tells John that her husband secretly buried her in the fields because he couldn’t afford a funeral. That he loved her very much, and that they had five children, all boys. That he brought a single red rose to her grave every Friday, until he died. That he always talked to her, told her he loved her. “We’re together now,” Violet whispers, “only our bones are still here. And one day, dust will be all that’s left. And it won’t matter, because he’s as beautiful as always. And he still brings me roses. Every Friday, he brings me roses, and our bones no longer matter to us.”

John listens in silence. He wonders if there are real people who buy roses every Friday, and talk to each other’s bones even though they can’t even hear them whisper. He wonders if love like this really exists.

When John is fourteen, the bones of Harry’s cat fall silent.

He imagines that they have disappeared, dissolved, melted into dust. There’s nothing left. It’s probably for the best.

The first time John sets a foot on a cemetery after dark, his heart beats in his throat and his palms are sweaty and his instincts tell him to run. He doesn’t, though. He walks right into the labyrinth of
gravestones and flickering candles in the dark, of muffled, disembodied voices and hushed whispers. Let’s them swallow him whole.

He knows the bones are dead and motionless and trapped in their rotting coffins, nothing but dust that has yet to disintegrate and become a part of the lifeless dirt beneath his feet. They can’t harm him.

The flowers on Grandma’s grave are wilting and covered in fallen leaves, slowly decaying.

“I don’t have answers for you, Johnny,” Grandma’s bones tell him, her voice resounding in his ears. She’s so close, just underneath his feet. He thinks he might feel the ground vibrate when she speaks, but he knows it’s an illusion.

“Why?” John asks. His voice is trembling, but just a bit.

“Because I’m dead, you silly boy,” Grandma scolds, “Soon I’ll be nothing but memories. There’s barely anything left of me in this world. I’m a shadow. You can’t rely on me anymore.”

“Why can I hear you?”

“Because you’re special, my love,” Grandma says.

John swallows. “I don’t want to be special.”

“It’s a gift, Johnny. And one day it will save someone. One day it will help you save yourself.”

“I miss you, Grandma,” John says weakly.

“I know,” the bones say, and for some reason, Grandma’s voice muffles all the whispering and shrieking of hundreds of dead voices around them, “and now leave. You’re young and you’re healthy, and you shouldn’t waste your time talking to dust.”

“I’m—I’m not insane, am I?”

“No,” say the bones, “and even if you were – insanity is not the worst that can happen to you.”

“Then what is?” John whispers. His mouth feels dry. “What is the worst that can happen to me?”

“Numbness,” Grandma says simply, “And now go, my dear. Leave them alone. The longer you listen to them, the longer the voices will follow you. You’re young and alive, John. You shouldn’t let the dead bother you.”

“Goodbye, Grandma,” John says soundlessly, and then his walking away because his skin is crawling and the voices around him are deafening. And then, all of a sudden, he’s running, sprinting, until the screaming cemetery spits him out like an unwanted intruder, and he runs and runs until his heart hammers in his chest, and leaves it all behind.
John becomes used to it. If he’s perfectly honest with himself, he’s become used to it a long time ago. After sunset, things are different. The darkness tickles his skin and the cemetery is the loudest place in the world and he tastes and iron dust on his tongue when he hears them talk. That’s the way it is.

In the dark, the bones whisper.

And sometimes John whispers back.

John isn’t sure why he decides to become a doctor. He can’t really pinpoint the moment he makes this decision, but it feels like something he won’t regret.

Med school is a nightmare and a fever dream at the same time; the years pass quickly, which is odd, considering that the nights John spends over his books simply won’t end. The people around him are just like him; young and mad and convinced they can change the world.

John lives his life the way he thinks it’s supposed to be lived.

He studies until four in the morning and sleeps through his lectures; he makes friends and drinks too much, he dances at shabby bars and buys the cheapest food he can find and sleeps on a mattress for half a year because he can’t afford a proper bed.

He goes to the anatomy lab at night, because the clean, white bones help him memorize the hundreds and hundreds of anatomical terms he needs to remember. The bones rarely talk about anything else. Their only purpose is to be conductors of knowledge, a mere sum of their parts. John quite likes to hear them whisper.

He sits through endless lectures and dissects corpses during the day, when the bones are asleep; he learns how to stich up bleeding wounds and how to open someone’s chest cavity without harming their heart; he goes out and falls in love and kisses and breaks up; he reads and studies and sleeps and fucks, and time runs through his fingers like sand.

John says goodbye to his bones before he leaves the campus.

_Humerus, Tibia, Fibula, Radius, Femur, scapula, vertebrae cervicales._ A group of old, whispering friends bid him a silent farewell.
Finding a long-term girlfriend is not supposed to be easy. Love is not supposed to be easy in general, but all of this is… ridiculously easy, really. His friends tell him that he and Catherine are a beautiful couple. It’s because they’re so similar, they say. Both bright and short and sturdy and with a temper that shouldn’t be underestimated. Catherine is the one for him; John hears it over and over until he almost believes it.

She’s the first person he tells about it. He expects her to laugh, because Catherine is easily amused.

She doesn’t laugh, though. She rolls over, wraps the duvet around herself and gives John a look so full of contempt that his insides freeze.

The next day she tells him that he shouldn’t lie to get her attention.

The day after that she yells at him that she has read up on schizophrenia on the internet and feels that she doesn’t have the strength to deal with this.

They break up a week later.

Everyone is shocked. John isn’t. Not particularly, at least. He decides to joy the army, though, which sort of helps.

What they don’t tell you about Afghanistan is that it’s a mass grave. A hot, sandy burial ground where people shoot each other and blood soaks the desert like water and the screams of his dying mates haunt John’s dreams.

He tries to ignore the dead that are following him wherever he goes. Sometimes he thinks they’re watching him. They know he’s coming. They’re waiting for him and the darkness. They know he can hear them when they yell at him at night. They beg him to take them with him; home to their families. Home to their villages. They want to be buried in familiar soil.

John doesn’t listen.

He is here to save the living, after all. He’s trained to treat their injuries. Stitch them up. He keeps the blood flowing and their hearts beating and makes sure their bones stay silent within their living bodies.

He doesn’t have time for the dead.
Kisses taste different when they’re fuelled by cheap vodka and desperation. Kisses shouldn’t taste like that and army doctors shouldn’t kiss their patients. Not even when they have fully recovered.

“Why are we doing this?” he asks the man and doesn’t really want an answer. Thomas. That’s his name. Probably.

“You saved my life,” Thomas breathes between kisses.

John pushes him against the wall of the dingy barrack, one knee between his legs, kissing him so hard that he thinks he can taste iron on his lips.

“It’s my job,” John says and reaches down to undo his belt, “saving lives.”

“I usually shoot people,” Thomas says matter-of-factly, “That's the exact opposite. What does that tell us?”

“Don’t care,” John hisses and really fucking means it.

Thomas dies two weeks later; he bleeds to death under John’s hands on a dirty stretcher in an even dirtier tent. One shot in the lower abdomen, one in the right thigh. The latter is the fatal one, ironically enough. John shouts at him to wake up while his blood spills over his fingers. It’s useless, of course. He can feel his last heartbeat under his fingertips and hates himself for it.

They bury the man somewhere in the desert, cover him in sand along with the others. They send his family a note to inform them that their son has fallen for his country. Implying that they should be proud. They probably aren’t.

John drinks the rest of their cheap vodka that evening and wonders how long it will take the desert to make a man vanish. To uncover his bones and make them whisper.

When John is bleeding out on a stretcher a few months later, he wonders, once more, how long it will take the sand and the heat to turn him into a skeleton. It seems like the right opportunity to wonder.
The sheer irony of it all hits him when he’s losing consciousness.

When he’s dead, nobody will hear the bones talk. When he’s dead, the bones will be silent forever.

John doesn’t die in Afghanistan. Not in the conventional sense.

He goes home instead and lives something akin to a life in a bedsit in central London. His shoulder is ruined, his leg aches for no reason. Every part of his body betrays him. He eats and sleeps and drinks probably too much Scotch because it helps him fall asleep. Being asleep is the next best thing, really.

He meets Sherlock Holmes a while later; a madman with an affinity for murder and mysteries, a ridiculous coat and the ability to make John fall desperately in love with an illusion.

Sherlock doesn’t feel things like that. He does have a skull on the mantle though, and calls it his friend, which John finds sort of amusing. Fate is cynical like that.

The skull never talks to him.

John figures it’s jealous because Sherlock prefers to spend time with him now. He tries not to feel smug about it.

Eighteen months later, Sherlock is dead. Dead as can be; skull split in half and no pulse and everything.

Sherlock has jumped off a building and John is terribly, miserably devoted to a dead man.
John is numb and nauseated and he hasn’t smoked in eighteen years.

He’s always hated cigarettes, never saw the appeal. He tried one at a party when he was seventeen and hated it, a few more when he was twenty-one and had a girlfriend who chain smoked. Her kisses tasted awful.

Smoking is never a good idea.

Now he’s sitting in his chair, opposite Sherlock’s, smoking one cigarette after another until he feels dizzy and nauseated, because if Sherlock wasn’t dead, he’d be the one ruining his lungs with tar and nicotine. Because, maybe, the air he’s breathing in this room has been in Sherlock’s lungs before. Because Sherlock has touched those cigarettes when he hid them under the loose floor board in the hallway. His last fingerprints are burning between John’s lips, turning into dust and ashes, crumbling between his lips.

“I would offer you one,” he tells the skull that’s never talked to him, gesturing at the last few cigarettes on the coffee table, “but your teeth look like you’ve never smoked in your life.”

“Very funny,” the skull retorts dryly.

John nearly jumps.

“You have a voice.” The corner of John’s mouth tries to imitate a miserable excuse for a smile.

“Apparently so,” the skull says.

John finishes his cigarette, drops it on the floor and crushes it under his shoe. It leaves a mark. Mrs Hudson will be mad.

“He was my only friend,” he tells the skull, a while later, “my only real friend.”

“I know,” the skull says simply, “and I think it’s somewhat tragic that you’re still convinced that’s all he was.”

John squints at the skull. Its voice is distinctly male; deep and velvety, intimidating when he wants it to be. A bit like Sherlock’s. Well. Birds of a feather.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

He can practically hear the skull smirk. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you what he told me,” it says, “Matter of confidentiality. He was my only friend, too.”

John stays away from Sherlock’s grave for a long time.

He doesn’t know what to expect. He doesn’t know how he feels about Sherlock’s bones and the
things they might have to say. He dreads hearing Sherlock’s voice again. Sherlock should never have become one of the voices that haunt him. Disembodied, empty. An echo. Not the real thing, because the man it once belonged to is nothing but a dead, fading imprint in the dust beneath his feet.

John isn’t sure what he hopes for. He isn’t sure of anything, really. He knows nothing. He’s just alone.

John refuses to accompany Mrs Hudson when she brings Sherlock flowers (roses and carnations, once a week, usually on Fridays after Bingo). She asks if he’s alright when she comes home, and he nods, smiles, thinks about his Whisky on the mantle that’s going to help him sleep tonight.

He talks to the skull from time to time. When he can’t sleep and the flat is empty and the dark and a morbid relict of a dead human being on the mantle suddenly feels like company. It’s not that have anything in common. They don’t even particularly like each other, but they’re both lonely and bitter and sarcastic and they both feel so very, very old.

John learns that the skull’s name is Frederick and that Sherlock solved his murder in 1990.

“He kept me as a souvenir,” the skull tells him, “always liked a touch of the macabre, I think. Glad he got rid of the dead snake, though. The smell.”

John snorts.

“At first, when he took me with him, I thought it wasn’t much of an improvement,” Frederick says, voice dripping with cynicism, “you know. Staying with him. I spent half a year in the corner of a filthy crack den. I kind of missed the wet hole they’d buried me in. But he talked to me, at least. His fever dreams were sort of interesting. I was less bored. I started to like him and his tantrums. He stopped doing drugs eventually. Good for him, less entertaining for me.” There’s a pause. “Then you came along and flattered him until he ignored me. You know the rest. Well done.”

“Mmh,” John takes a sip of the tea he’s been nursing for a far too long time, “jealous?”

The skull makes an indignant noise. “Jealous of you? Never. Kind of pity you, to be honest. Nothing worse than a man who doesn’t know what he wants.”

John bites his lip. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re kind of a prick?”

The skull doesn’t answer and stares blankly at John instead, black eye holes piercing his flesh like blunt daggers, trying to dissect him. It’s an illusion of course, but that doesn’t make it better. John feels nauseated all of a sudden. He pours his tea down the drain and goes for a walk.
When he finally brings himself to go to the grave, Sherlock’s been dead for seven months. It’s nearly midnight and John can hear the cemetery whisper, he can hear the voices come closer and their cries become more urgent as they slowly realise that they are heard. Every instinct, every shred of subconscious reason in his brain tells John to run. He doesn’t. He braces himself and walks right into the candle-lit labyrinth of screaming and laughter and lifeless human remains who sense his presence and want to drown him in noise.

He lays down the flowers he bought at a gas station on his way. They were cheap and they’re already wilting and the cellophane covered bundle of carnations next to the grave stone is nothing but a very depressive sight. John doesn’t care. His left hand is shaking.

What happens at the dark cemetery is worse than anything he could have possibly expected.

John has had nightmares about Sherlock’s voice before. About hearing Sherlock’s bones scream in agony, about hearing his voice from where he is now, muffled by dirt and stones and dust, about hearing pain and desperation and fear. Sherlock, when he was alive, was a whirlwind of motion, a fantastic brain in an equally fantastic body. John can’t even imagine what being buried must feel like to such a man’s lifeless imprint on earth.

He doesn’t have to worry about any of this, though. Not today.

The grave doesn’t talk to him.

Sherlock’s bones, no matter how hard John concentrates, refuse to say a word.

This possibility has never occurred to John. Sherlock is silent. The cemetery hums and whispers around him, beneath his feat, like a subterranean bee hive, and someone, dead or alive, is singing in the distance. It sounds like a farewell song. Sherlock’s bones don’t say a word.

He has lost him. For good. Even his last imprint in this miserable world doesn’t talk to him.

John has nothing. He is alone.

He goes home and cries for a while. He hasn’t done this since the day of the funeral and it feels oddly freeing.

“I would hand you a tissue,” Frederick says sardonically, hours later, “if I had arms.”
John goes out with a woman named Clarice exactly eight months and thirteen days after Sherlock’s
death. She’s an old friend of Harry’s and he’s seen her once or twice before. Years ago. He ran into
her at Tesco’s.

He decides to give it a try, not because he really wants to, more because he hasn’t done this in a
long time and it feels kind of… mandatory, at this point. He needs to prove that he hasn’t given up
yet, he needs to prove it to himself.

Clarice is short, brunette and laughs about every other word John says. She has a nose piercing and
an affinity for pencil skirts and John has no goddamn idea what he’s doing.

He goes home after an hour of forced conversation and faked interest, and the suspicion that
Clarice might actually be glad that he’s leaving.

The skull knows exactly what happened, the bastard. He’s not an idiot and Sherlock spent years
essentially teaching him about deduction, and ‘failed date’ must be written all over John’s face.
Frederick, as usual, is careful not to miss an opportunity to mock John. It’s sort of endearing how
determined he is to piss him off.

“Did she… throw you out or something?” he asks, a sadistic pleasure in his voice, “hmm… did you
get very far or did she dump you on the doorstep?”

“None of this,” John grumbles and sinks down into his chair, “We had dinner, nothing else. I left.
It was a disaster. Don’t know why I went in the first place.”

“Oh, I know why,” says the skull haughtily.

John gives him a look.

“You’re trying to forget him, you’re trying to cut him out of your miserable life. But you’re not
very good at it. It won’t work because you can’t just replace him with some dull woman who’s
willing to fuck you. You might as well give up. Go and weep at his grave like a proper widower.
Write him love letters and burn them while you mourn for your poor little heart. Don’t act like
you’re not grieving, John, your self-denial is pathetic. Mourn your would-be lover, don’t
compensate. You’re acting like an idiot.”

John feels the heat in his abdomen rise. “Shut up,” he says.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll pick you up and… and…”

“What?” Frederick says dryly, “Throw me in the bin?”

“S’not like you could do anything about it.”

“You would never throw me out.” Frederick sounds extremely sure about that and John knows
he’s right, but he’s not going to admit defeat.

“You’d be surprised,” he murmurs instead, half-heartedly.

“Mmh.” The skull is properly amused now. God, John hates him sometimes. “You don’t go out.
You neglect your friends. Your landlady has probably forgotten your name since you never talk to
her. You’re lonely enough to wait for a dead man’s skull to wake up at night, surely you won’t give me up now. Me, of all people who keep you warm, pleasant company.”

Self-irony sort of suits him, John decides.

“Maybe I find myself another bone. One that’s less annoying.”

Frederick chuckles. “How do you know another bone would even want to talk to you? Maybe nobody wants to talk to you. Nobody except me. Not even His Bones have anything, anything to say to you. Isn’t that the reason you’re so upset? Makes you think.”

John swallows, rubs his left thigh with his thumb, gets up, walks towards the bathroom. This is not fair. It’s entirely unfair, in fact, and painful and bizarre and his eyes are stinging and his left hand is trembling and he feels sick.

“You know what your problem is?” Frederick calls after him before he closes the door to shut him out, “Your problem is that you’re like him. You’ve become like him, you never consider the obvious. You’re too focussed on the details, the theory.”

John opens the bathroom door again and peers at him. “The obvious?” he spits out.

“You’re so caught up in self-pity,” the skull says emphatically, “that it’s never even occurred to you that empty graves cannot talk.”

John stops talking to the skull. He avoids him, spends his evenings in his room upstairs instead of the living room, reads his old thrillers and ridiculous detective novels curled up in his bed and tries not to think about the mocking, dead-eyed, sardonic presence in the room below.

He wonders what would be happening to him right now, if it weren’t for his strange, morbid talent. If he hadn’t heard what the skull said, if he’d never walked across a cemetery and tried to speak to a dead man he loves.

Maybe he would have moved out of 221B, found another place to stay that’s less full of memories and the lingering presence of a dead man. Maybe he would have gone to Harry’s, or his Father’s. Maybe he would have tried to mend old relationships or find new ones. Maybe he would have accepted the blonde nurse’s invitation for dinner last week. Maybe he would have got to know her by now (her name is… Mara? Marie? Mary?) and maybe kissed her, once or twice. She’s beautiful, smart, interesting and John has politely declined her offer and he doesn’t regret it at all.

That’s simply what he does now. Regularly. He wastes opportunities, refuses to think about things that could be, things he’s supposed to do. And somehow it doesn’t matter.

Sometimes he allows himself to think that the skull, the meddling, sarcastic bastard, might be right.

Sometimes he allows himself to think that the grave might be empty.

It’s enough to go by, for now.
He finds himself kneeling on the ground a few weeks later. He blames Greg who made him drink
the first pint, and he blames Mrs Hudson who didn’t prevent him from drinking the rest of his
Scotch on the mantle when he came home, and he blames the Scotch, and himself. Actually, he
blames himself the most.

“If you’re here,” he whispers, his knees wet and cold and his jeans dirty and his hands trembling in
the darkness, “if you’re here, talk to me. One word. One word is all I need, just… just tell me
you’re here. Give me a sign, give me—give me anything. Because I can’t go on like this.”

He’s pathetic, utterly pathetic, and a bit drunk and clutching at a grave stone to steady himself even
though he’s already on his knees.

“I love you,” he says, and he’s not sure if it’s a moment of surrender or mad, desperate courage, “I
love you and I always have, and if I ever get a chance, I will tell you. I will tell you, and if it’s the
last thing I do, I’ll – I’ll die a happy man. Because God help me, Sherlock, I love you.”

He realises seconds later that the whispering around him has stopped. It’s silent.

The cemetery is quiet, the dead are holding their breath, enveloping him in stunned, suffocating
silence.

A declaration of love is not what those bones are used to. He has surprised them; overwhelmed
them, probably.

He doesn’t flee the cemetery this time. He walks slowly, careful not to stub his toe on a gravestone
in the darkness. He stops twice, to brush dirt off of his knees and to rub his temples because his
head is spinning violently enough to make him lose balance.

He wonders what it’s like for his bones, to be heard. He walks on their territory and disturbs them,
rouses them from slumber, listens. The dead are supposed to rest. Maybe they fear him as much as
he used to fear them when he was younger.

Maybe the bones don’t haunt him, after all.

Maybe it’s he who haunts them.
A month later, John finds a dead man in his living room.

It’s a Saturday. John walks downstairs at nine, puts the kettle on, turns around and finds himself eye-in-eye with a man who’s seen things worse than death.

Sherlock is pale, paler than he’s ever been, eyes glassy, hair too long. He’s lost weight and he looks fragile, broken, as if someone has reduced him to a mere shell of a human being in an expensive suit that’s become too large for a tortured body. John reaches out, touches a silk-covered upper arm with trembling fingers.

Sherlock is real. He is warm and he’s alive and there’s a beating heart in his rib cage. His bottom lip trembles. Sherlock opens his mouth as if he wants to say something, closes it again. He doesn’t make a sound.

“How could you?” John asks, an hour later, when there’s more distance between them. “How on earth could you do this to me?”

“I had to,” Sherlock says, nursing his tea, wiggling his bare toes on the floor. He looks like he’s falling apart and barely able to hold himself together, and John wants to hold him, save him from the things he’s seen and done and simultaneously yell at him for causing him so much pain.

“You’ll have to explain this to me.” John rubs his thigh with his thumb. “You owe me that much.”

“Of course,” Sherlock says and John believes him. He feels warm. It’s as if Sherlock’s presence makes his body light up, brings him back to life. He’s yet to make sure he’s not dreaming.

“Everything,” John repeats. It feels very important to do so.

“Of course,” Sherlock says carefully, after a long pause, “I mean—You do, but you don’t seem… shocked. Did you… did you know? Did you know I wasn’t dead?”

“No. I just… suspected.” John can’t tear his eyes away from Sherlock’s face. His wrinkles have deepened and his eyelids are heavy with fatigue, and somehow he’s never been more breathtakingly beautiful, and all of it makes John want to cry, somehow.
Sherlock looks confused. “What gave me away?” he asks, “Who did?”

John glances at the skull on the mantle. It’s half past six, the sun will set soon. He licks his lips. “A mutual friend,” he says, and adds, “well, when I say friend—“

Sherlock stares at him in disbelief.

And for the first time in what feels like two years, John smiles.

Sherlock keeps his promise. He does tell John what happened in Serbia, in Poland, in Germany, in the basement of a bunker in Romania. They share unearthly amounts of tea in front of the fireplace and they talk, talk until they’re drowning in each other’s voices and the last two years spent apart have been made up for.

After all, John finds it easy to forgive.

They settle into their bittersweet normality with surprising ease.

It takes Sherlock months to truly come home, to arrive. John can’t do anything, really, except watch Sherlock Holmes come back to life.

Sherlock takes cases again, after a while. Easy ones, at first. Experiments start to clutter the kitchen table, newspapers pile up in the living room. John treats the healing scar tissue on Sherlock’s body and makes sure he gains a bit of weight.

A miracle of a man slowly unfolds again, before John’s eyes.

They have never been more alive.

“Tell him,” the skull demands harshly. This prompts John to drop his water glass. It shatters and John swears.
Those are the first words John has heard him say in weeks and the deep, imperious voice resounds in John’s ears and make a shiver run down his spine.

“It’s three in the morning,” John hisses, “don’t scare me like that.”

The skull watches him as he cleans up the mess, laughs sardonically when he cuts himself and wipes his hand on his pyjama bottoms. A single drop of blood stains the fabric, jet-black in the darkness.

“I always knew you were dreadfully indecisive,” the skull drawls, “but I never took you for a coward.”

John squints.

“Tell him. You got another chance, and heaven knows you should be grateful he’s alive. Now tell him. Don’t waste your life thinking about what could have been if you’d had the guts. Because who knows? Maybe you’re dead next week.” John could swear the skull flashes his teeth in the darkness for an instant, as if his derisive tone is not enough to humble him. “Believe me,” the skull adds, “it’ll be over in no time. Life is short. Next time you check you might be dead and then it’s too late. I’m an expert. Got stabbed in the back when I least expected it. God knows I won’t let you make the same mistake all over again.”

John walks back upstairs without another word.

The skeleton of a young girl is found in an abandoned house on Gallworth Street.

She died over twenty years ago and Lestrade calls them in at two in the morning (of all times) to find out how and why. John comes along, with a weight on his stomach, because somehow he knows that this is where it all ends. Secrets have to be uncovered eventually and skeletons are sort of… his Achilles’ heel.

The skeleton has been dug up and laid out in the middle of a small, dirty room in the basement of the ruin.

Sherlock is delighted. He pulls out his magnifier, starts to yell at people, enjoys himself immensely. John observes the bones in front of him. Thin and fragile, a short person (a girl, forensics said, 14 to 15 years old) multiple ribs broken ante mortem. John shivers when he hears her whimper in fear.

“It’s so bright,” the bones whisper. They have the thin, trembling voice of a young girl, scared out of her mind, “so much light, too much light. I want to go back, I want to lie where I was, I want to sleep. Let me sleep. Please—“

John drops to his knees next to the skeleton’s head, refrains from touching the fragile skull. It’s not as if he can offer comfort to a pile of human remains.
“Tell me,” he breathes, careful not to let anyone hear him, nobody except the lifeless shadow of a frightened, dead girl who begs for a peaceful rest, “tell me who did this to you. Tell me the whole story. I’m listening.”

“Will they leave me in peace if I tell you?” she asks.

John swallows. “I promise they will. I promise.”

“I took soil samples,” Sherlock announces excitedly, when they’re seated in the back of a cab, “might be useless, but it’s worth a try. There are only three female teenagers who disappeared in this area in 1993, and one from West Surrey. The soil could be incredibly conclusive—“

“No,” John says soundlessly.

Sherlock peers at him. “What?”

“You’re wasting your time, Sherlock. She lived right around the corner. She grew up around here.”

Sherlock’s mouth drops open. He stares at John, eyes narrowed to slits, the fingers of his left hand digging into his thigh. John’s heart beats against his rib cage. He feels nauseated and tired and he despises his strange ability more than he ever has.

John takes a deep breath and continues. “She was murdered by her stepfather. For no good reason, he just despised her and wanted her out of the way. He beat her up, broke seven ribs, then strangled her and hid her in the basement of the abandoned house right across the street. I’m—I’m sure that’s all you need to know to get Lestrade to arrest the man. Just make sure she’s buried again. They need to give her a proper funeral and a grave where her family can—can grieve.” John stops talking, helpless, all too aware of the fact that none of this could possibly make any sense to Sherlock. He’s exhausted. He needs sleep and he needs to forget a dead girl’s voice before it drives him insane.

“John,” Sherlock says, finally, after a long pause, staring at him intently, “you are—you are serious about that. You – you talked to a witness while I was examining the crime scene, but you didn’t leave the room, you didn’t—“ He cuts himself off, frowns. “John—“ he repeats then, hesitantly, “I don’t understand.”

John bites his lip. “I don’t expect you to,” he says and folds his hands in his lap, “just trust me. This once.”

“I always do,” Sherlock says.

John presses his lips together and stares stubbornly out of the window.

They don’t talk to each other for the rest of the day. John sits on his bed, tries to read; lies down, tries to sleep, can’t. Sherlock rumbles around downstairs.

He wonders if he could actually tell Sherlock the truth, but no matter how much he wrecks his brain, he cannot come up with the right words to say.
He does owe Sherlock a secret or two, though. Sherlock has shared his entire life with him after he came back, maybe it's time for John to do the same. If there’s anyone in the world who can handle dark, mysterious secrets, it’s Sherlock Holmes.

John isn’t sure if he would survive rejection, at this point. So he waits for an opportunity to present itself, and doesn’t admit to himself that he hopes it’ll never come.

His waiting is cut short merely two days later. Over breakfast, of all things.

“You were right,” Sherlock says matter-of-factly and takes a sip of coffee.

John frowns at his toast. “Was I?”

“The step father killed her, he confessed everything in a letter, eight years ago. Nobody’s ever read it. Well, nobody except me. I acquired it yesterday.”

“Has he been arrested?”

“He’s dead. Hanged himself in his bathroom shortly after his wife left him. The guilt, I presume.”

John’s stomach does something exceedingly unpleasant. “I hope they bury her far away from him,” he says dryly.

Sherlock puts his mug down and eyes him so suspiciously that John’s skin starts to tingle.

“John,” Sherlock says slowly, “John, you astound me.”

John looks up.

“You never say what I expect you to say,” Sherlock continues, “I don’t understand the way you think. I never really have, but it’s never been a source of frustration, not until now, because I used to be able to reconstruct your thought process, even if I can’t necessarily follow it, but now—Now—“ He cuts himself off and runs a hand through his tousled curls. He looks like he’s glowing in the soft morning light, sleep-soft and confused. “You are… utterly bewildering,” he finally says.

“Bewildering?”

“How did you know? Who told you it was the step father? How did you figure it out before I did?” Sherlock stares at him intently, as if he’s trying to read him and finds he can’t. He looks lost and John’s heart clenches.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he says helplessly, “believe me, if I told you, you wouldn’t understand. Nobody does.”

“I could try.”

John takes his time with what’s left of his coffee. When the mug is empty and he no longer has an
excuse to stare at it instead of Sherlock, he puts it down, rubs his left temple with his thumb and makes a decision.

“The victim told me,” he says, “the dead girl told me who murdered her. Not the girl herself. It’s her--her bones. I can talk to them. They tell me…things. They wake up at night and I can hear them.” His heart wants to burst in his chest because this is simultaneously the truest and most ridiculous thing he’s ever told Sherlock, and he really can’t expect him to believe any of it.

Sherlock’s mouth has dropped open. “John,” he says slowly, “you’re not – you’re not serious, are you?”

John finds it exceedingly difficult to look at him again. “I am,” he murmurs, “but I told you. You don’t understand, you cannot understand. Hell, I don’t understand it myself. It’s always been like that, since I was a child, and I don’t know why it’s happening, but it does. I can talk to the dead, at night. I can talk to their bones. And heaven knows I spent enough time thinking I’m – completely insane but—” He allows himself a pause to struggle for words. “You’re the second person I ever told about it.”

“Who was the first?”

“Girlfriend in university. Didn’t take it very well. It’s alright, I—I know nobody will ever believe that this is real, but it’s—it’s all I’ve ever known. It’s my reality, I guess.”

“People’s bones,” Sherlock repeats very slowly, as if he’s trying to let his own words sink in, “People’s bones talk to you.”

John nods. “At night. For some reason. Only at night.”

“And they have – the conscience of the person they belonged to? They talk about their life?”

“Yes. They’re not… they’re aware that their dead, you know,” John says thoughtfully, “they’re not ghosts. Or souls. Just… something that clings to what’s left of a person.”

Sherlock picks up his mug and stares at it, stares until his eyes become glassy. The silence between them envelops John like a heavy coat, suffocates him.

Sherlock empties his mug in one go, after minutes of silence. He looks up, just for a second. John blinks at him.

“Fascinating,” Sherlock finally says, gets up and waltzes towards the bathroom, leaving John gaping, with his heart beating so fast, he fears it might smash his ribs from the inside.

What a curious way to die that would be, he thinks sardonically.

At least the skull is asleep and can’t comment on his failure.
“When did it all start?” Sherlock asks, out of the blue, over Korean food two painfully silent days later.

John doesn’t have to ask what he’s referring to. “When I was little. Two or three years old, maybe. My parents never understood why I was so scared of cemeteries. I didn’t understand where the voices came from, at first, so I was—I was frightened.”

“Of course,” Sherlock says, as if anything John has just said makes any sense.

“Why do you act like you believe me?” John blurts out. “Why are you not mocking me for… for being irrational, why are you not all razor-sharp and logical and tell me to go seek professional help or something? Why are you not yourself?”

“Because,” Sherlock says quietly, “I have yet to draw a conclusion as to how you solved the case of the murdered girl, and your explanation is the most rational one so far.”

“What?”

“You misunderstand my methods, John,” Sherlock says and stabs a slice of meat with his chop stick, “logic is not about comprehending every step, it’s about accepting the limits of your own understanding and the fact that however improbable an explanation might be, if it’s the only one available, there must be a certain amount of truth in it.”

John swallows and pushes his Noodles with Spicy Chicken away from him. “You try to believe me because you feel like you don’t have a choice.”

“When you put it that way—“

“What you’re saying,” John interrupts him, “is that you believe me until you find proof that I’m insane, but you don’t understand.”

“Help me, then,” Sherlock says, “help me understand. Tell me everything from the beginning.” He looks up and their eyes meet, just for an instant. Sherlock looks radiant, eyes sparkling with curiosity and something that might just actually be affection.

And suddenly lowering his defenses doesn’t seem so scary at all.

They talk until sunset, then until midnight, and then they talk some more. Time flies by and becomes less important with every passing second; hours blur together but it doesn’t matter, it has never mattered less. Sherlock moves closer, however, inch by inch, until they’re pressed up against one another on the sofa, touching from their calves to their shoulders, and John keeps talking with the warmth of Sherlock’s body against his. Steadying him.

He tells Sherlock about Harry’s cat and the jaw bone in biology class, the woman under the bus station and the os femoris at the anatomy lab that called him an idiot once. He talks until his throat feels sore, and he keeps talking until he’s hoarse. He makes Sherlock scowl when he tells him that he knows more about his skull than Sherlock ever did. His eyes burn when he talks about Afghanistan and his heart clenches when he tells Sherlock about grandma and he actually blinks a tear away when he tells Sherlock about the day he first went to his grave.

Sherlock’s face lights up with a sudden realisation, then. “You tried to talk to me, when I was gone.”
“You never answered.”

“Because the grave was empty. That’s how you knew I was alive.”

John bites his lip. “I didn’t know. I suspected. It was a reason to hold out hope, and I’m just—I’m just so glad I –“ It’s difficult, finding the right words. Too difficult. “You don’t know what it was like, Sherlock. I would have done anything for a bit of hope. And this was as good a reason as any to believe that you were still—out there, somewhere. It kept me going, I suppose.”

“No, John,” Sherlock contradicts softly, “you are… fascinating.” His eyes sparkle in the dim light. It’s nearly three in the morning and John is acutely aware of the skull’s gaze that’s fixed on him. They’re being watched. It’s equal parts amusing and unsettling.

“I’m really not,” John says, “I’m perfectly ordinary and we both know it. I was just—born with a strange ability, I guess. I’m the stuff cheap horror movies are made of.”

“No, John,” Sherlock contradicts softly, “You are so much more than that. You are the only man in this world who feels compassion for a pile of bones, and you call yourself ordinary. You are a walking contradiction, and you are capable of something we both cannot explain and I – I refuse to let you call yourself ordinary.”

John smirks. “You refuse?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says earnestly, “I refuse.”

John can feel his curls tickle his right ear and his breath is warm against his nape and he smells like tea and home and heaven on earth and a moment later John finds himself cupping Sherlock’s jaw with both hands and staring at his lips; and another second later Sherlock whispers, “John,” and it sounds so broken and hopeful that it might as well be a declaration.

John leans in and kisses the man he loves for the first time, in their darkened living room, supervised by a sardonic skull and with trembling fingers holding onto every inch of Sherlock he can reach.

They don’t talk that night, not anymore, because everything has been said.

They go to bed and hold each other and let the darkness envelop them together.

The first time he sleeps with Sherlock is not slow or particularly gentle. There’s too much pent up energy for that. Too much desperation and pain and self-denial they have to make up for. The first time, they hold each other, press together, closer, closer, and come in their pants before they even reach the bed. They giggle about it later.
The second time happens right after the first time and lasts longer than either of them would have thought possible. When they’ve finished, it still isn’t quite over. Mostly because they both don’t want it to be. For the first time, John experiences the curious phenomenon of being completely unable to stop touching someone.

For all that the darkness tastes like dust, Sherlock’s kisses taste like pure, bright daylight. The soiled sheets feel like silk on John’s skin and the dim evening light that’s falling through the window panes dances on their skin when they move together.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asks.

John kisses the patch of skin under his left clavicle, feels his heartbeat, slow and steady against his lips.

“I’m counting your ribs,” he says and continues to trace his index finger down the side of Sherlock’s chest. His ribs are still too prominent. Just a bit more. John needs to get a bit more weight on him, just to be safe.

Sherlock makes a dismissive noise. “You’re a doctor. You know how many ribs I have.”

“Of course I do,” John says and continues counting.

Sherlock is silent for a minute. “What are they saying?” he asks, then, “my bones--are they talking to you?”

John smiles at him, rubs his thumb over his right pectoral, his nipple, to elicit a soft gasp. “It doesn’t really work like that,” he says slowly, “I can’t hear them as long as they’re still -- part of a whole. It happens when it’s just the bones. When they no longer have a purpose. At least that’s what I think. It’s not like I have an explanation.”

“So, for you to be able to talk to my bones, I’d definitely have to be dead? There’s no… alternative?” Sherlock sounds dangerously intrigued there, for a second.

John swallows.

“I’m still trying to understand, John.“

“Yes, I suppose so,” John bites out and slips away from Sherlock. Just a few inches of space between them. He feels cold, all of a sudden.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock offers.

“No, you’re not.”

Sherlock eyes him for a few second, as if he’s trying to make up his mind. “My bones would have talked to you,” he decides then, “if they had been there. If the grave hadn’t been empty. If I had been dead.”

“Sherlock—“

“If I die before you, you will talk to my bones every day,” Sherlock says matter-of-factly, “and they’ll talk to you. I’ll make sure. I won’t leave you. Never again. If that’s what you want,” he
adds, after a moment’s hesitation.

John takes a deep breath. “Yeah,” he says and snuggles closer again, let’s Sherlock hold him close and kiss the top of his head, “that really is what I want, you know.”

It’s dark when Sherlock tells him he loves him. It happens two days later. They’ve wasted enough time, after all, and Sherlock despises waiting.

It’s simple and unexpected and wildly brilliant, like everything Sherlock does.

Sherlock is already up when John walks into the kitchen in the early morning. Terrible night. John has more or less accepted that he’ll have to deal with occasional bouts of insomnia for the rest of his life. Not even sex helps. It’s alright. The bed was cold without Sherlock, anyway. He fetches a glass and fills it with water.

“John,” Sherlock says emphatically, looking up from his microscope upon noticing John’s presence, “you’re awake.”

“I am,” John confirms.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

John gives him a slight smile. Sherlock’s curls are tousled, he’s run his hands through them multiple times. Done a lot of thinking, then.

“John.” Sherlock frowns for a second. “My heart burns when I say your name. Not in an unpleasant way. I’m trying to determine if this is… supposed to happen.” He scratches the back of his neck. “I know there’s an explanation for that. Oxytocin. Extrasystoles due to extreme levels of adrenaline and emotional stress. But I need to know if that’s common. Obviously, I have had strong feelings for you for a long time, but finding out that they are reciprocated had a severe impact on the symptoms, and I have trouble interpreting them. I don’t have any empirical evidence.” His eyes are impossibly wide in the sparse light. “I’ve never loved like this before.“

“You’ve never—“

“I never loved anyone before. Not like this. Do keep up, John.”

John’s chest feels like it’s about to explode in a shower of sparks. “Sherlock,” he says and clutches a hand to his chest, shakes his head and laughs. “You impossible man.”

“Call it psychosomatic,” Sherlock says after a pause.

“Is that your way of… making a declaration?”

“I’m not sure.”
John smiles at him. “Give it a try.”

Sherlock doesn’t hesitate or struggle with himself, not for a second. “I love you, John,” he says emphatically, “I am in love with you. I have been for a long time, quite desperately in fact, and I—I just wanted to let you know, despite the fact that it’s probably obvious.”

John feels like somebody is holding his heart in a fierce, iron grip. He feels the blood rush to his face and rubs his cheeks with both hands. “Sherlock,” he says, “I—I can’t—“

“Was this the wrong thing to say?” Sherlock asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

“No. No, it wasn’t.” John fights the tears back and very nearly succeeds. His eyes are just a little wet. “This was… this is the best thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“If I had known that you want to hear it,” Sherlock says quietly, “I would have told you earlier. I would have told you yesterday. Or the day before that. I would have told you once every hour, actually I can do that, I can tell you as often as you want. I thought you knew. I thought you knew that everything I did was… for you.” He sounds helpless, like he’s realising he did something wrong and isn’t sure how it happened.

“Shh.” John holds out his hand. Sherlock takes it.

“You promised you’ll never leave again,” John says, “so this is forever?”

“For as long as you will have me,” Sherlock tells him.

John takes a deep breath and squeezes Sherlock’s hand a bit.

This, right here, is their future. They’re holding it all in their hands. Their life at 221B, the cases and criminals, unreasonable amounts of tea and toast with Sherlock’s favourite honey and takeaway, violin concertos at five in the morning and a talking skull on the mantle and every last one of their morbid secrets laid out right in front of one another.

They might leave this place one day. Maybe they’ll buy a cottage somewhere, and Sherlock can keep the bees he’s so fond of, and John can write books and grow his own tomatoes and the years will pass without leaving a mark on them, as long as they have each other.

And in the end, their bones will lie side by side, helpless and unresisting, waiting for time to turn them into dust. And it’s strangely, frighteningly, not scary at all, John thinks. They’ll be together, till the very end, because love is like that.

John runs his left thumb over Sherlock’s pulse point, feels pure life throb under the soft, pale skin that makes Sherlock whole. He reaches for Sherlock’s other hand and holds it too.

Sherlock smiles a wild, beautiful smile; wrinkles around his eyes and all. There’s a distance between them, and it would be too much if they had less than a lifetime to close it.

For now, they’re holding hands. Fingers interlaced. Skin and muscle, tendons and arteries and bones.

_Hamate, capitate, trapezoid, trapezium, pisiform, triquetral, lunate, scaphoid, phalanges._ For now,
that’s enough.

“I love you too, Sherlock,” John says, and Sherlock lowers his head to hide his blush.

The skull watches them in silence.

Above London, the sun rises.

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