All On That Golden Afternoon

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Summary

John's life is as plain and dull as a life can be, until he follows a stout man with a pocket-watch on the longest and strangest journey that he could have ever imagined. He will meet Hatters and Caterpillars and even a Queen, but will he make it in time for the grand Tea Party? Alice in Wonderland Crossover/AU.

Notes

This story was originally inspired by a tumblr photoset made by the brilliant hellobrotherdearhowareyou, who kindly gave me permission to use her idea for a story. This is written in the style of the original Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, with the story as a fusion between both it and Sherlock.

John was beginning to get very tired of sitting by himself in his flat and of having nothing to do; once or twice he had even tried to write a blog post like his therapist had said, but he found that he had nothing to say, and “what is the point of talking about a life where nothing happens?”

So he finally left his flat and walked through the park and wondered to himself what he was going to do with his life (as well as he could, for the cane made it difficult for him to see far into the
future), when suddenly a stout pale man in a brown trench coat with a large pocketwatch walked up next to him.

There was nothing especially remarkable in that situation, and John did not find anything strange in the man saying “John! John Watson! It’s me, Mike Stamford!” (when he thought about it later, he realized that something about an old friend randomly finding him in a park was not quite normal, but it had seemed perfectly acceptable at the time); but when he mentioned a potential flatmate to John and hurried on to a nearby hospital, John followed, for it came to him that this was his one chance to escape his dreary life, and after all opportunities like this did not happen every day. So with mild curiosity he followed the man across London as he muttered “Mustn’t be late!” to himself, until he saw him walk into a large hospital in the middle of the city.

After only a moment’s hesitation he followed the man into the hospital without a second thought of what would happen to him afterward.

The hospital was big and cavernous, and there were so many hallways and doors opening up on either side that John soon found that it felt like he had been walking there forever without even realizing it. Either the hospital was actually very large or he was walking very slowly, but he had lots of time to look about and wonder what he would find at the end of these hallways. He tried to peer through open doors, but the spaces were not big enough for him to see clearly. Sometimes he saw glimpses of operating tables and sometimes he saw test tubes and microscopes, and once he even saw a riding crop flash through the air, but to his great disappointment he could not see the person wielding this strange instrument and soon gave up trying.

“Well!” thought John to himself as he limped through the halls of the empty hospital, “after such a trip as this, I will think nothing of walking to the store. I won’t say anything about having to walk to the store at all!” (This wasn’t quite true, but it was a nice thought)

On, and on, and on. Would this hospital never come to an end? John seemed to have lost Mike Stamford in his long walk through the hospital and was quite alone on his walk, so with nothing else to do he began to think to himself. “I wonder how far I have walked by this time? This hospital seems unreasonably large and I must be getting near the center of it soon. But I wonder if I’ll miss what I’m supposed to see and walk right on through the hospital and out the other side? That would be most unfortunate and leave me quite lost and alone.” For you see John did not have the best sense of direction, and ending up alone in a strange part of the city seemed quite huge and terrifying to him.

On, and on, and on. John kept on walking and thinking, quite absorbed in his thoughts, when suddenly he was faced with a single door and he stopped suddenly and the walk in the hallway was finally over.

John looked about curiously and caught a glimpse of Mike Stamford again slipping quickly through the door. He did not want to lose Stamford again, so John hurried forward and went with him through this new door. John could hear Mike muttering quietly “Finally here, look how late it’s getting!” He was right behind Mike as he entered the room, and soon found himself in laboratory lit by a pale glow.

The laboratory was filled with test tubes and microscopes and Petri dishes, but as John peered at them he found that he could not understand what was happening in any of them. They certainly seemed most mysterious bubbling away there, and John was not sure he wanted any part of them.

Suddenly he saw the largest table in the center of the room and set up on it was a large microscope with the strangest man John had ever seen sitting there. The hat the man was wearing was most extraordinary and unlike any hat that John had ever seen, with a brim on either end and flaps for the ears that seemed rather pointless when John considered them. But the hat fit the man quite
well, strange as it was, and John could not possibly imagine the man without the hat or the hat without the man.

There were test tubes and microscope slides scattered around the man like the remnants of some great tea party that had ended long ago and as John looked closer he thought he could even see some cups of tea sitting next to experiments as if this were the most common thing in the world. “That does not seem quite safe” John thought to himself “but I suppose this man knows what he’s doing. He certainly seems most comfortable with all this strange stuff.” (In fact all of the strange stuff seemed quite natural to John by now, as usually happens when people are in extraordinary circumstances for too long)

John realized that the man had been staring at him most intently for quite some time and immediately felt very uncomfortable at the scrutiny he was receiving. Had he done something wrong? Had he offended this strange man in some way? But the man continued to stare with great curiosity until he finally spoke.

“Your leg is hurting you” he said sharply, and John found that he was a bit offended by this abrupt remark. Just because it was true did not mean that the man had any right to say it.

“You should not say things like that to people you have just met.” His voice was severe. “It’s rather rude.”

The man did not seem to mind. “Afghanistan or Iraq?” he asked quite out of nowhere.

John was puzzled. “I am not very good at riddles, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not either.” The man smiled a small, strange smile. “It wasn’t a riddle, it was a question. Were you in Afghanistan or Iraq?”

John was startled, but he answered the question all the same. “It was Afghanistan, but how could you possibly know that?” he asked quickly. He was burning with sudden curiosity about this man and how he knew such a private thing about him.

But the man did not answer and instead stood up from his desk quickly. He grabbed the scarf hanging from the back of his chair and wrapped it around and around and around his long neck like a ribbon, followed by the swoop of a long black coat that made him rather look like a dramatic bat. John smiled at the image

“Would you like to come to a tea party?” he asked once again quite out of nowhere. This seemed to be a thing that he did often.

John was surprised that this man would want to invite him anywhere, much less to a party. “A tea party? What sort of tea party?”

“Only the grandest sort of tea party, of course. I am having it back at my flat very soon, and you are invited along with the March Hare and the Dormouse of course. Would you like to come?”

John hesitated for a moment, but he decided quickly that he certainly didn’t have anything he would rather be doing and that a party might be the right thing to break his boredom. “I suppose I would, yes. A party sounds nice.”

The man smiled again, a quick flash of teeth that reminded John a bit of how a cat might look if it found a saucer of fresh cream. “Excellent. Meet me there soon, but make sure you aren’t late. We won’t wait for you.”

The man strode quickly over to the door and pulled it open and the room suddenly seemed to
grow huge and cavernous as the man prepared to leave John alone again.

“Wait!” John called desperately, feeling all at once that he did not want to be left alone here. His leg was hurting quite badly now and he was afraid that he would not be able to get out of this room and back onto the street. “But I don’t even know who you are.”

The man paused on his way out the door and looked back at John. “I’m called the Mad Hatter by most people, but you can call me Sherlock Holmes” he replied with a grin and wink, and then he was gone.

The room echoed greatly without the Mad Hatter there and John realized that now even Mike Stamford was long gone. “But how am I supposed to find this tea party without anyone to take me there?” John looked around the room and said to himself, “Well, I suppose I will have to find my own way there.” He walked over to the door that the Mad Hatter (Or was it Sherlock? John was not sure which name seemed more appropriate for that odd man) had walked out of. But when John tried the door, it would not budge even one bit.

He pushed, he pulled, he tried every which way to force that door open. But his leg was too weak after the long walk down the hallway and it would not support him enough to get the door to move. John began to despair of ever leaving that room, and he slumped miserably against the door. “What a pathetic failure you are, John” he berated himself quite severely (For John had the strange habit of being excessively hard on himself, even when things were not his fault.) “How can you not open this door that Sherlock opened so easily? If only my damn leg were stronger.”

After several moments of leaning against the door however, he propped himself up and walked away from it, determined to find another way to get out of the room. For as much as John was much too hard on himself sometimes, he was also very determined when he set his mind to doing something. He looked around the table that was cluttered with scientific objects, and he suddenly noticed the most beautiful little teacup sitting in the middle of a clear space on the table. It was quiet delicate and gilded around the edges, and full of a steaming hot cup of fresh tea. Written on it in a flowing golden script were the words DRINK ME.

Well, that was certainly odd. It was one thing for a pretty little teacup to say “Drink Me” on it, but John was much smarter than to just drink something because it said so when it was surrounded by so many dirty and dangerous things. “I don’t want to catch some strange disease from something sitting next to it, so I’ll take a look first to see if it’s safe.” He was a doctor after all, and he knew what sorts of things could happen to silly people who drank things that were contaminated with something dangerous or dirty or even deadly. He inspected the cup very carefully, looking for dirt or something from one of the experiments in the tea or on the delicate cup.

But there was nothing there and the smell of the tea wafting up to John was making him quite thirsty. It had been some time since he last had any tea and this cup did smell awfully nice and wholesome. “Well it looks safe to drink, and maybe it will help my leg a little bit. Tea usually does make my leg feel just a bit better.” So John took the cup of tea and tasted it, and found that it was delicious and satisfying and everything that he could want in a cup of tea. He finished it quickly.

Soon though John began to feel the oddest sensation beginning in his leg. “What a strange feeling!” And it was indeed strange – his leg was tingling strongly and all the pain was gone at once. “Curiouser and curiouser!” said John to himself, for he found that he could now stand strongly without the aid of his cane. He walked over to the door that he could not open earlier and tried it again, and look! He pulled the door open without any trouble. He walked through the door and out of the room.

Suddenly John found himself out on the street again. (He was not quite sure how this had happened, but he was not overly worried about it) The afternoon was getting quite late now and
John needed to hurry if he was going to find the Hatter in time for the tea party. He had such a long way to go after all, and he did not want to be late.

He picked a direction at random and began to walk, feeling both brave and a little frightened. “I do hope nothing bad happens before I can reach the tea party. This has been a very strange day so far.” John continued to think about all the odd things that had happened to him as he walked through the empty streets and a new strange thought occurred to him. “I wonder if I’ve been changed at all? Everything was so ordinary and quiet just yesterday and now nothing is ordinary at all. Everything has been turned on its head and I met a strange man and I can walk without my cane all of a sudden. Am I still me? Or have I become someone different?”

These were not very pleasant thoughts, but they were soon interrupted when John nearly bumped into a pair of extremely odd and unpleasant people. John usually did not like to judge people so harshly when he was just meeting them, but he knew right away with that special sort of knowledge that people sometimes have that these were two nasty pieces of work. They looked very much alike despite their differences because even though one was male and beaky and the other was female and harsh, they wore matching expressions of suspicion and anger. Even though John had nearly walked into them they were too busy arguing with each other to take the slightest notice of someone unimportant like him, and so he had to clear his throat loudly to get their attention. They looked over at him suddenly, as if they had just seen him.

“Who are you?” They spoke in unison, and they had the nastiest voices that John had ever heard.

“My name is John. John Watson. And who are you?”

The beaky male one laughed and spoke first. “My name is Anderson but everyone calls me Tweedle Dee. She’s Donovan, but everyone calls her Tweedle Dum. What do you want?” His voice was nasal and whiny and John found that he disliked the man more and more with every word he spoke. But disliking him would not help him with what he needed, so he asked politely,

“Well I’m looking for Sherlock. Do you know where he is?”

“Sherlock?”

“Who’s Sherlock?”

“There’s no Sherlock around here.”

The two spoke so fast one right after the other that John could barely tell which of them was talking at any given moment. They lost interest in him very quickly and turned back to argue with each other again.

To keep their attention, John interjected quickly, “Wait, I think he’s also called something else. The Mad Hatter? Do you know where he is?”

The two looked at him as if he had asked how best to stand on his head.

“The Mad Hatter?”

“You mean the Freak?”

“Why would you want to talk to the Freak?”

John was taken aback at their abrupt rudeness. He was quite sure that he had never met two more unpleasant people in all his life. “Well I met him not too long ago and he invited me to this tea party, and I’d really like to go but I’m afraid I haven’t the slightest idea where he lives. Do you?”
“Don’t bother with the Freak.”

“No, don’t bother. He’s horrible. He’s just a big liar.”

“He lies all the time to make people like him but he’s nothing but a dangerous psychopath.”

“Stay away from him.”

“Yeah, stay away from him.”

And then suddenly, just like that, the two turned to each other and began to argue once more. John had no idea what had just happened, but he knew without a doubt that he did not like these two angry people and that he wanted nothing more to do with them, thank you very much. He walked around them slowly to avoid catching their attention again, but they were far too busy with their shouting to pay him any mind. With relief he walked quickly away from them and further on in search of Sherlock and the tea party.

John kept walking, but since he did not know where he was going he did not know whether or not he was making any progress towards his goal. He looked all around at the buildings and the cars, but he did not see anything that looked like a landmark or a place that would help him. There was a phone booth standing on the corner next to him however, and as he walked near it the phone in it began to suddenly ring. John looked to his sides and behind him and into the street but he did not see anyone to answer the phone, and after a moment it occurred to him to open the booth and answer the phone himself.

He entered the booth and picked up the phone, and as soon as he did so a voice came out of the receiver telling him to enter the large warehouse across the street. John did not especially want to go into the warehouse, as it was quite dark and intimidating, but the voice on the phone had been quite insistent that he do as it said and John did not want to risk making it angry. So he went over to the warehouse and entered, and immediately upon walking in he saw a large man in the center of the room, standing perched on an umbrella, smoking a pipe and not taking the slightest notice of anything else.

The man and John looked at each other for many long moments without speaking; finally the man took the pipe from his mouth and spoke to John in a bored and supercilious voice.

“And who exactly are you?” the man asked.

John did not like how this conversation was beginning one bit.

“My name is John Watson, but I think you already knew that” he answered shortly.

The man arched his eyebrows delicately and looked most displeased. “What on earth can you mean by that?” he asked sternly. “Why would I know who you are?”

John answered the question patiently, although in truth his patience was wearing very thin as the conversation went on. “Well you see I was walking through the city quite undisturbed until the phonebox across the way rang and a voice that sounds very much like yours asked me to come over here. I think you understand what I meant now.”

“I’m afraid I don’t” the man sniffed in disdain.

John smiled, even though the situation was not particularly amusing. “It seems to me that a man who would go to the trouble of calling a phonebooth at exactly the right moment to tell me to come over and speak with him would know exactly who he was calling. So tell me, sir, who are
John’s voice was calm as he spoke, but he was not happy. Not even one bit. This had been a long and strange afternoon so far, and this conversation was not making it any better. And he definitely did not like this man smoking his pipe and looking at him like a speck of dirt.

But the man did not answer his question right away. In fact he smiled again and said smoothly, “It has come to my attention that you are looking for the Mad Hatter. Is this true?”

John was rather irritated with the whole nature of this conversation, especially the bit where he had been ordered to enter a strange warehouse and have a conversation with an even stranger man. He drew himself up as tall as he could and answered “Yes, it is. What is it to you, exactly?”

“Think of me as a concerned party, that’s all.” He smiled again, and John was very sure that it was the least sincere smile that he had ever seen. “I think it would be best if you didn’t have anything to do with the Mad Hatter. He is a difficult man to be around.”

John had had quite enough of this. He turned on his heel to exit the warehouse and walk away from this absurd conversation. The man called sharply, “Wait! I have something important to say to you.”

The imperative tone of his voice caused John to turn and walk back towards the man, although he was not happy about it.

“Yes?” he asked tightly.

The man smiled again, his face wreathed in thick smoke that swirled and drifted around him like a living thing. His smile was cold and empty, but John was not afraid of him. He stayed silent for many long moments until John was almost sure that he would not say anything else, but he finally spoke once more.

“So you intend to find the Hatter and go to his tea party?” His voice was quiet.

John nodded, and then spoke when the man continued to stare at him. “Yes, I do. What concern is it of yours?”

“I just wish to warn you that people often find themselves…caught up with the Hatter. He can draw you in and make you forget what you were looking for, or what you should be doing. You seem like a sensible person – I would hate to see that happen to you.”

It was John’s turn to smile now, and the smile had just as little warmth as the strange man’s. “Thank you for your concern, but I do think that I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, I can see that. Don’t say I didn’t warn you though. He does have quite the way of charming people.” And with that last statement and a twirl of his umbrella, the man vanished out of sight.

John was quite a bit unnerved by this whole situation, but there was nothing that could be done about it now. The man had said his piece and left without ever telling John who he was, only giving him cryptic warnings about the man he was looking for. “I suppose he is a bit right, even though I don’t like to admit it.” John said to himself as he walked out of the warehouse. “The Hatter, or Sherlock, or whoever he is has certainly drawn me in with his promise of a tea party even though I haven’t the faintest clue of who he is. I hope that man with the umbrella doesn’t turn out to be entirely right, he was most unpleasant.”

John strolled down the street, feeling that he was at last getting closer to finding the Hatter and the tea party he had been promised. People definitely seemed to have heard of the Hatter around here, even if they were trying to keep him away for some reason, and that was sign that he was in the right area at least. As he walked John noticed that the houses were becoming steadily more and
more posh, with large fences and ornate doors and really very intimidating windows that glared down at him as if he did not belong. “I hope the Hatter does not live in this neighborhood, I would be most out of place here. I’m not dressed nearly well enough for a tea party at one of these houses and I don’t want to be embarrassed.”

But before he could worry much more he was interrupted when he saw a group of men standing nervously on the sidewalk in front of one of the posh houses and arguing quite viciously with each other. They appeared to be very angry with each other, and John was afraid that if they continued to argue in this fashion they would soon do each other an injury. Curiously, each of the men had a number pinned prominently to their jackets and these numbers seemed to be the source of their argument.

“No, you’re wrong! She agreed to see me next, that’s why my number is lowest!” shouted the man with a Two on his coat, going red and splotchy in the face.

“No! I was next, not you! My number’s much higher, I’ve been waiting much longer than you have!” the man with a Seven shouted back, his face a matching shade of angry red.

“Nonsense, I’ve obviously been here the longest! It’s my turn!” screamed the Six, apparently without an argument in favor of his number but still quite determined to get his say in.

Two stamped his foot and shouted back, “Of all the terrible arguments I’ve ever heard –“ but stopped quite suddenly when he caught sight of John walking towards them. The others looked over towards John as well and frowned at him.

John cleared his throat nervously, not wanting to upset them any further. “Sorry, but could you all tell me why you’re shouting at each other?”

Six and Seven did not reply, but instead looked over at Two expectantly. Two frowned again, and answered, “We’re arguing over who has the next turn to see the Queen. We’ve all been waiting a very long time and none of us can quite remember whose number means what anymore. The Queen will be most displeased if her next client doesn’t come in on time, but none of us wants to wait any longer than we have to. It’s a terrible mess.”

None of this made very much sense to John. Who was this Queen they were talking about? Why was it so important to see her? But before he could ask any of these questions there was a great commotion from inside the house and the group of men turned to look and whispered excitedly to each other “The Queen! The Queen!”

John was most interested to see who this mysterious Queen was, so he looked over just in time to see quite the procession exiting the large white house. First came a string of men who looked both happy and quite exhausted, and John was startled to see that they were covered in what appeared to be welts and bruises. This didn’t seem to bother them however – in fact they were comparing their marks and laughing with each other as they left the house. After the men came a lovely young woman with pale red hair, carrying a clipboard and looking most efficient with a painted-on smile that did not reach her eyes. And last of all, emerging with a flourish and a snap of a great black riding crop, came the Queen of Hearts herself.

She was lovely, and terrifying. John did not know what was so frightening about her – she really was quite beautiful with her dark hair and pale skin and lips as red as blood. Her dress was white as fresh snow and her shoes matched her lips perfectly, a brilliant red that seemed to glow in the sunlight. She was one of the most beautiful things that John had ever seen, and one of the most intimidating. Looking at the wicked gleam in her eyes and her firm grip on the riding crop, John suddenly understood why the men had dropped to their knees at the sight of her.
When the Queen finally reached the street she looked down at the men who were now kneeling on the pavement with a wicked grin, eyes lingering on each of them as if she were weighing and measuring them in her mind and deciding which would please her most. But when her eyes lit upon John standing quite upright and staring at her in wonder, her expression changed from excited to wary and the gleam left her eyes and the smile slid right off her face.

“Who is this?” she asked her attendant severely, but when she did not answer the Queen turned and addressed John directly. “Who are you? Why do you not have a number?”

John swallowed nervously before replying, “I am John, your Majesty” (he was not sure if this was the proper form of address for her, but this was a woman that John did not want to offend unnecessarily) “and the reason I do not have a number is because I only just arrived and don’t quite know what’s going on.”

The Queen sniffed angrily and looked down her nose at John, which was an impressive feat considering she was not taller than he was. “Are you not here to see me?” she asked with great disdain. “Everyone is always here to see me.”

“But ma’am, I’m afraid I don’t know who you are or why people come to see you.” He hesitated for a second before continuing uncertainly, “I was just passing through, you see. I’m looking for someone else.”

This seemed to anger the Queen even further, and she snapped out angrily, “How can you not know who I am? I am the Queen of Hearts!” When John did not respond to this she flushed an angry red and stepped closer to him menacingly. “I know what people like. I give them what they like. And they love me for it.” Her voice had sunk dangerously, and she was examining John closely now in a way that made him most uncomfortable. “I can tell what you like, and how best to give it to you. I can break you, I can make you beg for mercy, I could even take off your head right now and have you thank me for it. Would you like me to try?” She was right in front of John now, her hand caressing the riding crop gently as she looked him up and down.

John was frightened, but he found as he stared her down that sudden courage welled up in him from an unknown place. He was growing quite frustrated with people threatening and harassing today, and this Queen seemed to him to be nothing but a particularly clever bully. “I’m sorry ma’am, but I don’t think I would like those things at all. They sound nice enough, but it’s just that I don’t have the time right now. I’m looking for a friend and I’m afraid if I don’t hurry now I will be late to the tea party I’m invited to this evening.”

The change these words worked on the Queen was astounding. Her face was suddenly a picture of perfect sweetness, with perhaps a hint of eager excitement that unsettled John a bit for a reason he could not name. “A tea party?” she asked. “Is it the Mad Hatter’s tea party?”

“Um, yes it is” John answered slowly. “I met him earlier this afternoon and he invited me to his tea party, but I’m afraid I’ve gotten rather lost and I don’t know where I’m going. Do you know where it is?”

Red lips curved into a perfect smile that sent shivers racing down John’s spine. “Oh I certainly do, my dear. You see, I’ve wanted to get my hands on that Hatter for quite some time now but I’ve been sorely lacking in a way to reach him.” She stepped closer to John, speaking quietly. “Will you help me? I would be most grateful if you did, and I would reward you most handsomely.” Her voice was low and breathy, and she reached a hand up to stroke John’s cheek gently with nails as blood-red as her lips that scraped across his skin like claws.

John stepped back out of the Queen’s reach, repelled. “You know, I don’t think I will. I may not
know the Hatter at all, but I think even I know that he would want nothing to do with you.” He looked down at the riding crop clutched in her hand and felt suddenly sick. “And I’ll thank you to never touch me again.”

The Queen’s face twisted angrily and she snarled at him “How dare you refuse me! Kate! Men! Seize him!” The men on the sidewalk lunged towards John and tried to grab him, but he was too quick. He darted out of their grasp and dashed off, praying that he would never meet someone that manipulative or terrifying ever again.

As he sprinted away, the Queen’s words rang harsh and shrill in his ears. “OFF WITH HIS HEAD!”

John ran, paying absolutely no heed to the direction that he was taking. All he knew was that he needed to go, to get away from that woman and her whip and her smile as sharp as knives. The breath came ragged in his throat, terrified that she would catch him, terrified that he would never find Sherlock and be left wandering in this city alone forever. Being alone had not bothered him before, but now it weighed down on him like a physical thing, crushing the hope and life out of him. “I don’t want to be alone anymore!” John said to himself as he ran. “I want to talk, and laugh, and live with other people, even if they are mad.” For John knew now that despite all of the warnings he had received, or perhaps because of them, he definitely did want to find this mysterious Hatter and attend his party and perhaps even become his friend. (This last thought was surprising to John, as he did not even know the Hatter and had absolutely no idea whether or not the Hatter would want to be his friend at all. But John wanted to try at least and the thought of finally having a friend was a pleasant one.)

He began to slow down as he became more and more tired, until he was once more walking through the empty streets as evening fell. The fear had finally left him when he realized that he had escaped that awful Queen and her men and her whip, and he was again calm enough to gaze at the buildings as he walked. This part of the city was far less ornate and intimidating than the area in which the Queen had lived, and John found as he looked around that he liked it immensely. The streets were lined with cozy shops and flats, and it was overall the perfect mixture of busy and tranquil. “Oh, I do hope the Hatter lives somewhere in this neighborhood. It’s by far the nicest that I’ve found so far, and I would not mind staying here one bit.”

He was thinking deeply on flats and shops and a quiet, happy life when he was suddenly startled by a smiling man sitting sprawled out on the steps of a flat with a shiny black door.

The man only grinned wider when he saw John approaching. He looked very good-natured and friendly at first sight, but as John looked further he saw that the man’s eyes glittered dangerously and that his smile was in truth razor-sharp. He reminded John very much of a large and dangerous cat – harmless perhaps at first glance but with hidden claws and teeth like needles beneath the surface. This was a man to be treated with respect, and no little caution.

John walked up to the smiling man slowly, unsure of what was the appropriate thing to say. “Hello there sir. I’m sorry to bother you but…” His voice trailed off uncertainly, but the man only smiled wider.

“Oh, sir. I do so love to be called sir.” The man’s voice was curiously high-pitched and sing-song, a mocking tone that grated on John’s last nerve despite its friendly cadence. “It’s lovely to see you here at last, my dear. I’ve been waiting for you for such a long time.”

“You’ve been waiting for me?” John was baffled by this statement, as baffled by anything he had seen or heard on this long, strange day. “Do you know me? I’m sorry if I have met you before and forgotten you, but I don’t think I’ve ever met you before in my life.”
The man grinned so widely now that the smile seemed to split his face in two, wider than any person had a right to smile in such a situation. He stood up from the steps of the building and smoothed out the wrinkles in his suit with a flourish. “You don’t know me, but I know you John Watson. In fact, I know a great deal about you and what you’re looking for.”

This only served to unnerve John even further, but he pressed on with this odd conversation nonetheless. He was exhausted from his long trek and he wanted nothing more than to find his destination, and soon. “Do you mean the tea party? Do you know how to get there?”

“Well, my dear, that is exactly my problem.” His voice was thoughtful now, but still sing-song in tone as if he were mocking John with his every word. “You see, I want to attend this tea party very much, but the Hatter is being most uncooperative. We have quite a history together, the Hatter and I, and he is being rather difficult about it all at the moment.”

“What do you mean, history? You know the Hatter?” John asked, puzzled.

“Oh yes, there is so much history between us. We are exactly alike you see. He doesn’t like to admit it, but we are so alike in so many ways that we really are made for each other.”

John did not know how to respond to this puzzling statement. He could not think of two people who seemed more different to each other than this man and the Hatter, so he asked instead “But are you invited to the tea party as well?”

The man barked out a brittle and empty laugh. “I’m afraid that my invitation seems to have gotten…lost in transit you see. I know that the Hatter would be most pleased to see me only he doesn’t know it yet.” The man’s smile became charming and winning and even emptier than before, and he narrowed his eyes at John. “But he invited you, I see. Perhaps you could take me in with you? I would be so grateful.”

This was all terribly familiar to John, who could not help but remember the Queen of Hearts asking him for nearly exactly the same thing, but there was something different here. The Queen had been sneaky and manipulative it was true, but this man felt far more dangerous. His smile was blank, fixed in place with long practice and utterly unmoving as he stared at John and snaked his head gently from side to side.

That decided it. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do that.”

Quick as lightning, the smile vanished from the man’s face. It was replaced by a mask of fury and insanity so intense that John stepped back a pace, frightened by the sudden change. “Oh, I don’t think you know how this works, John.” He spat John’s name out like it disgusted him. “You will take me to the Hatter, or you will regret it more than you could possible imagine.” He smiled again, and it was the most frightening thing that John had ever seen. “Do you understand?”

John swallowed heavily and felt his heart thumping in his chest like a frightened rabbit and knew what he had to do. “No. It’s not going to happen.”

The man blinked and stared at him for a moment, and the next moment was standing right in front of John and long slender fingers were wrapped around his throat. John gasped as the fingers tightened, staring into eyes the glittered with insanity and a smile that was twisted with hate.

The man’s voice was a whisper. “Good night, Johnny boy.”

The air was swiftly vanishing from John’s lungs and he could only gasp, “You’re mad.”

He laughed, and there wasn’t the slightest shred of sanity in it. “Of course I am. We’re all mad here.”
His fingers tightened even further around John’s throat, crushing and squeezing and pushing the life out of him. John clawed frantically at the man’s hands trying to pull them off, but he could get no purchase and was only able to scramble and tug with increasing desperation. What a way to die! After this long day, after surviving and seeing and doing so much, to have all the air choked out of him by this smiling madman! John felt his vision start to fade as blackness crept in around the edges until soon all he could see was that cursed smile as sharp as daggers, and he prepared himself for the end.

But the end did not come.

“Moriarty!” A booming voice rang through the evening air, startling John back into consciousness and causing the man to loosen his grip on John’s throat. He pulled away and as John doubled over on the pavement gasping for air he saw the swirl of a familiar black coat as the Hatter approached.

When John could finally look up, he saw the Hatter standing in between him and the man apparently called Moriarty, who was beaming away at the Hatter like a child who had just been given their favorite toy. The Hatter looked just as John remembered him, with his great black coat blowing gently in the evening air and his rather absurd hat still perched on his head, but this time there was an expression of rage and hatred like John had never seen before on his face. He looked disgusted at the very sight of Moriarty, a sentiment that John found he agreed with most wholeheartedly.

“Ah, darling. So nice of you to finally join us.” Moriarty’s voice had lost its insane edge and was back to charming once more, but that swift change alone was enough to make John shudder. “John and I here were just discussing the upcoming tea party you are having. He seems to think that I’m not invited.”

The Hatter sneered with disdain and replied “You’re not. You never will be, Moriarty. Now get out of my sight, I want nothing to do with you.”

Another flash of hatred passed over Moriarty’s face, but it soon vanished to be replaced by the ever-present grin that gleamed cruelly in the dying sunlight. “One day you’ll understand. We’re just alike, you and I, and one day you’ll see that.” He looked down at John in disgust. “This little pet you’ve found for yourself can never hope to keep you entertained for long, and then you’ll come find me. I know you will.” Moriarty had begun to slowly fade as he spoke, beginning with his feet and ending with the grin which remained long after the rest of him had gone.

The Hatter reached a gloved hand down to help John off the pavement where he was still sitting dazed after Moriarty’s sudden attack. “Are you alright?”

“Am I too late? Did I miss the tea party?” John asked in a daze, still unable to believe everything that had just happened to him.

Sherlock remained impassive, but a corner of his mouth quirked up quickly as if he were trying to suppress a smile. “No, you didn’t miss the tea party at all. In fact you’re just in time.” He gestured at the black door Moriarty had been sitting in front of, which John could now see had small brass numbers shining out 221B onto the sidewalk.

“I’m here? I’m finally here?” John could not believe it. “I spent so long looking for you, I asked so many people where to find you, but none of them knew. I thought I’d never get here.” The Hatter continued to look at him impassively and John became slightly uncomfortable under the scrutiny. “Thank you, by the way, for saving me from that mad man Mr. Hatter.”

This at last caused the Hatter to smile for real, and it was a warm smile that warmed John through.
“Call me Sherlock, please” he said, and pushed the door to the flat open.

As John followed Sherlock into the building and up the stairs, he marveled that after all this time he had finally found what he was looking for. It felt so strange to be here at last, to no longer be searching for something in the big wide world but instead safe and sound in this cozy flat. John had walked so far today and met so many strange and dangerous people that he could hardly believe it had all happened to him in the first place. The long afternoon seemed to blur together into a golden haze, full of wonder and doubt and fear and excitement, and it all led him to right here and right now.

They climbed and climbed up the long flight of stairs to the flat, each step creaking and groaning their protests with every step. The building seemed to be a living thing, shifting and breathing and making little noises alongside the people who lived here, and John found that he liked the feeling of it immensely. It felt homey, lived-in, and welcoming – all the things a proper flat should feel like. He realized suddenly that they had reached the top of the stair while he had been lost in thought and they were even now entering the flat itself. John’s eyes went wide with wonder.

The flat was perfect. It was everything he had ever wanted in a flat and more. Yes, it was certainly messy and a bit cramped from all the piles of books and papers and science equipment and random things (John had no idea why a home needed a skull or a knife driven into the mantelpiece), but the clutter only made it seem more friendly and inviting. There were squishy chairs that were begging to be sat in (John and his very sore feet particularly had their eye on the soft-looking plaid one) and a fire roaring in the hearth, warming the entire flat with its flickering glow. After only thirty seconds, John already felt like he was home.

He saw after a moment that Sherlock was pointing towards the large party table set up in the middle of the room. It was huge, taking up a massive amount of space in the sitting room and extending partially into the kitchen, and it was absolutely crammed with the maddest tea party that John had ever seen. Cakes and plates of biscuits jostled side by side with pots of tea in every shape and size, more tea than John had ever seen in one place before. The pots were steaming merrily away, fresh and hot and making the entire flat smell of tea and warmth and safety. Strewn amidst the food and teacups and teapots were the remnants of what appeared to be old experiments; just as in the lab so long ago there were microscopes sitting next to teacups and biscuits piled high on what looked to be enormous glass slides. It was utterly mad and topsy turvy and wonderful.

Sherlock was looking at him expectantly. “Do you like it?” he asked, his voice steady but with the slightest hint of uncertainty underneath.

John grinned. “Oh God, yes.”

This was apparently exactly the answer that Sherlock had been hoping for, as he clapped his hands excitedly and pulled John over to the table by the arm. “Excellent. Come, let me introduce you to the others.”

For the first time John noticed that there were indeed two others at the table that he had not seen before. One was a pretty and friendly looking young woman in a lab coat, sitting at the end of the table and fiddling with a slice of cake. Sherlock introduced her as the Dormouse, to which she smiled and then muttered under her breath “Molly, it’s Molly.” Sherlock didn’t take any notice. The other was an older lady dressed all in purple fussing busily about the table preparing tea and replacing cakes and making sure that everyone had their proper share all while chattering happily on and reminding the room that she was just doing this once, mind you. She was apparently the March Hare, although she asked John to simply call her Mrs. H. instead, and Sherlock smiled at her fondly and gave her a quick peck on the cheek before sitting down in the middle of the table.
All in all it was a very cozy scene full of tea and food and good cheer, and John was quite taken with the whole affair. However the table was quite crowded and cramped in the small sitting room and there did not seem to be any extra spaces available for John to sit at. He stood awkwardly to the side debating whether or not he should ask for a seat, not wanting to disturb the three of them in their comfortable positions that seemed to suit them so well. But after a moment Sherlock looked over at John and gestured impatiently at a small chair next to him, obviously insistent that John come over and join him.

Relieved that he was expected to sit with them, John walked carefully around the piles of books and clutter to the table and slowly worked his way over to the chair Sherlock had indicated. It was quite small indeed, but he found that he did fit there as long as he was sitting quite close to Sherlock. “I hope he doesn’t mind me sitting so close” John thought to himself as he settled in. “Then again I suppose he must not since he is the one who set the table.” It was a tight fit, but it worked.

At long last the tea party began in earnest. Cakes of every possible variety were passed around the table, some delicate airy little things and others big blocks of chocolate and frosting. John did not know which one to choose and so he took a small piece of each and found them all delicious beyond imagining. Sherlock took none, instead turning his nose up slightly as each plate passed him by. There were biscuits aplenty as well, perfect for dipping in tea and crunching on noisily. And the tea, the tea! There pots upon pots of tea, all piping hot and perfectly steeped, begging to be drunk and savored and enjoyed.

Chaos reigned as plates were passed around at random, teapots were shuffled around for space, and everyone tried to fit around the overloaded table. There was violin music coming from somewhere that John could not see, just loud enough to be heard but not enough to drown out the low hum of conversation that was flowing around the table. It was utter madness, and John loved every second of it. He could not remember a time that he had felt more welcomed, or included, or at peace, and the close quarters of the table and the party and the guests only made him feel more safe and happy. He felt a smile growing on his face without even meaning to, a rare occurrence indeed for him, and soon he was grinning away like a fool at nothing in particular.

After a little while when they were all busy eating and drinking and chatting away, Sherlock looked over at John and caught his eye. He leaned in close and spoke quietly in John’s ear so that the others would not hear them.

“Do you like it here John?”

John pondered this question for a long moment. It was a very important question, after all. But as he thought, and as he felt the peace of the flat and the tea party and Sherlock’s company wash over him, he realized that the answer to the question was indeed quite an easy one. He smiled broadly at Sherlock and said, “Yes, I like it very much. I even think I might be happy here.”

Sherlock smiled in return, and of all the smiles and grins and grimaces that John had seen today this was the most real and the most warm and the most welcoming. This smile transformed Sherlock’s whole face, bringing light and laughter into his eyes and erasing the scorn and arrogance that he wore like a cloak. This smile welcomed John in, and John knew that he never wanted to leave this place or this man he had journeyed so far to find.

He was home.

“Wake up John!” trilled his alarm in the early morning, shaking him awake.
John stirred and sat up in his tiny bed. “What a curious dream I’ve had!” he said to the empty room. There was no one there to describe his dream to, but he felt the strongest urge to tell someone about all the fabulous things he had seen. He tried to write down the dream as best he could on his blog, but he could not find the proper words to describe the strange adventures he had and the people he met. The empty page looked blankly at him, the blinking cursor seeming to say “Yes, that’s nice dear, that was a curious dream. Why don’t you go make some tea?” The silence of the room agreed. So John listened to the empty page and the empty room and made himself some tea, still thinking what a wonderful dream it had been. What a shame it had not been real.

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