By Any Other Name

by WellPlayedPenny

Summary

In 'The Habitation Configuration' Sheldon told Penny that it took Leonard to make him like her. So what would happen if Leonard didn't move into apartment 4A before the Pilot episode?
The apartment door closed and immediately Leonard Hofstadter’s mind went into overdrive. In the few minutes he’d been at 2311 N. Los Robles Ave. he’d encountered a seemingly deranged man in the lobby and a very imposing transvestite. Neither individual was the punch line of this adventure, however, as both had indicated there was someone far stranger he had yet to meet.

Leonard softly cleared his throat and straightened the collar of his blue nylon jacket before crossing the hall and knocking at apartment 4A. The door opened just enough to let a tall, gangly man wearing a black Flash t-shirt over a green longer-sleeved shirt, brown pants and white sneakers wedge into the space.

“Yes?” the man said quietly.

“Dr. Cooper? I’m Leonard Hofstadter. I called you about the apartment. You said—”

“I know what I said,” replied Sheldon in a hurried monotone as if the whole exchange was painful. “I know what you said. I know what my mother said on March fifth, nineteen ninety two. You’re one knock redundant.”

“What?”

“You knocked four times. Three is optimal as it’s long enough to grab one’s attention without being annoying.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Leonard cocked his head in an attempt to capture Sheldon’s eyes but aside from the initial glance at his face the blue orbs seemed fixated on the shorter man’s shoulder. *I wonder if he’s shy or autistic?* "I wonder if he’s shy or autistic?* “So, anyways I—”

“What is the sixth noble gas?”

“Huh?”

Sheldon’s mouth twitched in disapproval. “You called yourself a scientist. ‘Huh’ is not an acceptable response.” He made to close the door.

“Uh, radon!” blurted Leonard. The door opened.

“You really should do something about your guttural emphases.” Sheldon’s eyes locked with Leonard. “Kirk or Picard?”

*At least he’s a Star Trek fan.* “Oh, uh, well, that’s tricky. Um”—he caught Sheldon’s raised eyebrow. “I swear I’m smart!” Leonard cleared his throat. “Original Series over Next Generation but Picard over Kirk.”

The taller man nodded. “Correct. You’ve passed the first barrier to roommate-hood. You may enter.”
Leonard walked in and immediately noted the sparse conditions. In the middle of the room were two lawn chairs, a television and round industrial spools which functioned as a coffee table and lamp stand. A quick glance revealed whiteboards stacked under the large window and more against the west wall. The only sign of personalized whimsy came in the form of a large DNA model that sat on the floor next to the bookshelf.

“Oh, this is pretty nice,” he said diplomatically. “Uh”—he mentally slapped himself—“the bedrooms are back there?”

“That depends,” Sheldon said evenly.

Leonard grinned, absolutely amused at the situation. “I don’t understand; their existence is conditional?”

“No,” Sheldon said slowly and to Leonard’s mind rather patronizingly. “But your ability to perceive their existence is conditional on you passing the second and third barriers.”

“There’s three?”

“Each more daunting than the last,” the lanky man said. “Have a seat.” Leonard made to sit down. “No! That’s where I sit!”

The experimental physicist gave a little sigh. This was going to be a hell of an interview.

XxX

Leonard stepped out of the apartment and into the hall—*more like into reality*—and pressed the elevator button. Granted the apartment was the nicest he’d seen and the rent was reasonable but Dr. Sheldon Cooper was almost certainly nuts.

“Who the hell schedules their poop time?” he tsked. The door opened and he stepped in the elevator and pressed for the lobby. There was that bachelor apartment near Raj’s place. Maybe Leonard should give it another look-see?

After all, it might be small but at least it wasn’t full of crazy.

The door closed and the elevator descended.

xTBBTx

Penny’s feet barely touched the ground as she all but floated into the building’s elevator and pressed the eleventh floor.

“Hi!” she said to the elderly man next to her and flashed a devastating smile. “Nice sunny day, huh? Although most days are sunny here so I guess I should have said ‘another nice, sunny day’.”

“That it is,” chuckled the man.

“We just moved here from Nebraska and oh my God it’s amazing here,” gushed Penny. The elevator door opened and she stepped out. “Take care!”

The man watched her hips sashay in the red Capri pants as she walked.

“Definitely amazing,” he smirked.

Penny went down the hall and turned the corner to the apartment. To *their* apartment. She sighed happily and put her key into the lock and opened the door.
“Honey, I’m home!” she bellowed.

“Someone’s in a good mood,” said a male voice from the bedroom. Penny dumped her purse on a stack of boxes and ventured to the room to see her boyfriend setting the box spring on top of the replacement board of their bed frame. He looked up. “So?”

“Mission accomplished!” She cleared her throat. “Starting Thursday I am an official waitress at The Cheesecake Factory!”

“That’s one down. One to go.”

“You’ll get that job, Kurt,” Penny said soothingly. “You bounced back in Nebraska and you’re big enough for the job.” Kurt laughed.

“Big enough for the job’, huh? I’ll show you big enough.”

In two strides he was across the room; with a squeal Penny turned to dart down the hall only to be lifted high into the air. He turned her around and pressed her to the wall, massively muscled arms on either side of her blocking any attempt at escape. Their lips crashed together as Penny’s arms slid around his neck.

So far everything was working according to her plan: drive out from Omaha to Los Angeles, find an apartment, get a job. The only thing left to do was get that movie career she’d always wanted. Kurt had been reluctant to move since it was half way across the country. What if they didn’t get jobs? What if he didn’t become a personal trainer and her, a movie star? She told him not to worry; she had a backup plan: become a television star. That seemed good enough for him—not so much for Penny’s parents.

There’d been weeks of arguments when Penny dropped out of community college in order to prepare for her move and budding ‘movie career’. After much deliberation and shooting up of several cans behind the barn they realized they couldn’t stop her and so let her go with the hope that she’d come to her senses after a few months and return home. While Kurt wasn’t exactly a family favorite Wyatt was at least comforted by the young man’s ability to protect Penny with his muscle bound physique.

Penny broke the kiss and gave a Cheshire grin.

“Let’s test that board of yours,” she purred.

“The one under the mattress or in my pants?”

In a matter of moments there was a pile of clothing in the hall and two bodies entwined on the bed.
A/N: I’m a TBBT nostalgic and with this story I really want to celebrate an aspect of the show that, to me, makes it shine: the Shenny relationship. I debated over on ShennyHQ (a great place for meeting show nostalgics, Sheldon purists and of course our ever lovin’ Shenny ‘shippers) whether to make this a romance or ‘just a friendship’ fic but it came to me that downplaying their friendship misses the point: Sheldon and Penny are first and foremost friends and it’s from that point that the added chemistry of two stubborn and passionate people genuinely liking and loving each other has springboarded an entire following of Shenny ‘shippers and writers. To understand Shenny is to know that it isn’t vested in a romantic endgame it’s the journey and what a journey it is with sarcasm and glaring looks. Prank wars and adhesive ducks.

Penny has truly taken her ‘whackadoodle’ Where No Sheldon Has Gone Before.

Thanks again to Rene’ for looking over yet another attempt at a short story gone horribly astray. Your council is legendary and appreciated.

For Zelha, who wrote such a warm and wonderful letter. I’ve taken your suggestion and run with it regarding Penny’s career. It’s not the sequel you wanted to ‘Daily Occurrences’ but I hope you like it nonetheless. *Lynn

Each day is separated by a xTBBTx. Note that the days are NOT consecutive.

Events happening on the same day are separated by a XxX.

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

xTBBTx

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born. –Anais Nin, The Diary of Anais Nin


***Two Years Later***

Sheldon removed his sleep mask before reaching across to silence the alarm. He returned to his prone position and carefully moved his feet up and down. Next he raised his arms several times. Satisfied that he hadn’t strained anything in the night he sat up and pulled back the blankets. He rolled his feet in a circular motion before slipping them into his slippers. Tilting his head back, he rocked it from side to side before making a complete circle. As he stood Sheldon began rolling his shoulders and wrists.

“Vocal test. Morning vocal test.” He winced. Off by one note. He cleared his throat. “Second vocal test. Second morning vocal test.” Now satisfied he put on his housecoat and made his way down the hall to the washroom. On top of the toilet tank was a tub of antibacterial cloths; he pulled one out and used it to raise the toilet seat. He then reached into his pajama pants for his penis in order to complete his mission.

“Pee for Houston, pee for Austin, pee for the state my heart got lost in.” He completed his job. “And shake twice for Texas.” Sheldon pulled out another wipe and flushed the toilet. He then
wiped down the seat. Crossing over to the sink he applied antibacterial soap to his hands before turning on the tap. After rinsing his hands he dried them with his Monday towel and proceeded to shave.

After he had finished and cleaned up he departed for the kitchen. He went to the cupboard and pulled out his juice glass before opening the refrigerator and pouring himself a half glass of pulp-free orange juice. As he drank he consulted his daily fecal chart. According to the shape, colour and consistency of yesterday’s bowel movements he should pick a cereal in the mid-range of fiber content.

Once his cereal was properly measured and combined with a quarter cup milk Sheldon ventured with bowl and glass in hand to his lawn chair and sat. He turned on the tv to the weather network and set the remote on the table before applying antibacterial cleanser to his hands.

As he ate he watched the forecast, the meteorologist giving a ten percent chance of rain. While that might not seem much it still wasn’t zero percent and as he spent time working with quantum numbers he knew an awful lot happened between one and zero. He’d bring an umbrella.

He turned off the television, gathered his dishes and made his way to the sink to wash them. Sheldon checked the time on the stove. Five to eight. His bowel was once again like clockwork.

Sheldon went to the washroom and got out his bathroom equipment. As he went he donned a pair of latex gloves before opening a ziplock bag and pulling out a metal ruler. The physicist got up and measured his excrement before returning the ruler to its bag. He then pinched the feces with his fingers to note consistency. Now satisfied he again sat and stripped off his gloves so he could finish cleaning himself.

After washing his hands he stripped and filled the foot bowl with warm water and antibacterial soap. He turned on the shower before stepping into the bowl and swishing his feet. Approximately one minute later he went into the tub and closed the curtain. He lathered himself, first with a bar of Ivory soap then a second time with Ivory shower gel, all the while letting the Johnson’s Baby Shampoo with its no more tears formula sit in his hair.

Once clean he exited the tub and dried himself with a towel before dumping the foot bowl water. He then sprayed the bowl with bleach before proceeding to coat the shower walls, tub and curtain.

He stood back behind the tape line in front of the sink and flossed and brushed his teeth before putting his toothbrush back under the UV light in its plexiglass case.

Grabbing his clothes he padded into his bedroom and put them in the hamper before venturing to his closet and dresser to pick out his Monday apparel. Monday meant ‘Green Lantern’ and since this was the first Monday that meant an original Green Lantern shirt. Sheldon applied deodorant and talc to his person before dressing, slipping on his shoes after donning his bus pants and tan windbreaker.

Back in the living room he recorded his fecal findings on the refrigerator chart before slinging his messenger bag across his body. Sheldon went to the front door, grabbed his keys and umbrella and checked his watch. He was thirty five seconds early.

He waited.

Thirty five seconds later he opened the door and turned out the lights before locking up.

Dr. Sheldon Cooper was on his way.

XxX
Sheldon hated the bus. It wasn’t just a biohazard on wheels; its very nature was contrary to his own. Oh sure, it was supposed to follow a schedule, but did it arrive at eight forty? No. Sometimes it was eight forty two or eight thirty eight. Then there was that day it came at eight thirty five. He had to run for it and twisted his ankle. The Pasadena Transit Authority got an earful for that one.

Then there was the problem of stopping for other passengers. As he could only approximate the amount of people boarding and disembarking from the bus as well as the average speed of the vehicle itself the whole affair quickly devolved into entropic chaos. Either he’d be on time or late for work as he didn’t have the ability to be both simultaneously like Schrodinger’s cat.

There was a plethora of banal chattering around him and he did his best to ignore it by looking out the window. It was the same route he’d travelled for four years. With his eidetic memory he remembered each shop and house just like he could tell in a glance how many new people there were on the bus when he boarded.

Fortunately the woman with red pigtails and an incessant need to say “well, duh, yeah” into her phone every twenty seconds was here and would disembark with him at the university. Not that he cared for her company; he loathed ringing the bell cord after he’d once taken a cotton swab to it and had determined its bacterial count.

Sheldon undid the bungee cords that lashed him to his seat and tucked them into his messenger bag as the bus came to a stop. He exited and waited for the light before crossing onto campus. Caltech was his first choice in where he wanted to work as it was both close to and far away from Galveston. Not that he visited his hometown often; indeed it was at his mother’s insistence that he ‘got his caboose on the train’ to visit family.

That was three years ago.

He arrived at the physics building and proceeded to the faculty mailboxes. As he opened the door he inwardly sighed as Shirley, the department secretary, was busy sliding papers into the boxes.

“Oh, Dr. Cooper,” she said in a friendly manner. She’d learned the hard way not to say ‘good morning’ as he’d badgered her into explaining her reasons for determining why the day was ‘good’ as opposed to ordinary.

“Ms. Grant,” he replied as he opened his box, causing Shirley to smile. Dr. Cooper was the only one to call her that.

Sheldon took out his sole piece of mail: a memo reminding people that the application for department head deadline was this Friday. He slipped it into the recycling bucket and left.

All the way down the various corridors he encountered other faculty members and gave a curt acknowledgement where necessary but for the most part he passed in silence as people knew his discomfort with the whole greeting process.

He fished out his keys, unlocked his office door and entered. His eyes gave a quick scan of the room and once he was satisfied that nothing was touched he crossed over to his desk and set his messenger bag and umbrella on the floor next to his chair. Grabbing an antibacterial cloth from a dispenser on his desk he wiped the light switch. He then took off his bus pants, folded it and placed it in a reusable shopping bag and stuck it in the corner. Next out was his own sanitizer as he slowly lathered his hands. Satisfied with his state of cleanliness he settled himself down to business and read over his work on the whiteboards.
As he lost himself in the numbers the tension in his body subsided. Gone were the nagging thoughts of the germ content of his surroundings and the distraction of being in close proximity with so many people. Here on his whiteboards was solitude, where his Beautiful Mind transported itself into the very heart of the Early Universe.

A thought came to him and Sheldon went to another board and quickly jotted it down, letters and numbers forming a complex equation across its surface. He stood back and pondered.

“Still not right,” he muttered. The black hole information paradox was a real puzzler; no wonder Hawking and others failed to solve it. Of course they weren’t Sheldon Cooper.

The lanky man returned to his first board and resumed his work.

XxX

“I’m sorry but your rice-to-raisin ratio is unacceptable,” Sheldon tsked to the cashier as he held up a bowl of rice pudding. “Over the past year and a half since the hiring of the new kitchen manager the raisin count has declined by thirty two percent. I know; I counted.”

“So take it up with him,” the lady said as she punched through his salmon on whole wheat bread and bottled water. She indicated the pudding. “Do you want that?”

“Such a dynamic question. ‘Do I want it’? Yes, I do want rice pudding. You advertise having rice pudding and yet this”—again he held it up—“isn’t rice pudding. If anything it’s an egg-rice casserole.”

“Hey,” said a voice from behind. Sheldon turned to see a short man with a bowl haircut, bright red pants with a large alien head buckle, a red checkered shirt and dicky. “Do you mind? We’re all on a schedule here.”

“Good point.” Sheldon turned to the cashier. “The sooner the manager gets here the sooner we can all enjoy our lunch and get back to work.”

The cashier rolled her eyes.

XxX

“Nice of you to join us,” smirked Raj as an exasperated Howard set his tray on the lunch table.

“Yeah, well it’s not my fault. I was stuck behind a whole whack of crazy,” he growled as he opened his bottled water.

Leonard looked around warily. “I didn’t see Professor Rothman.”

“No. A lot taller and a whole lot whackier. Well except for the urine thing.” Howard indicated Sheldon, who sat alone at another table. “Over there. Looks like a praying mantis. He said the raisin count was unsatisfactory in the rice pudding.”

“Oh my God,” said Leonard incredulously. “That’s the guy I told you about when I was looking for an apartment. That’s Sheldon Cooper.”

Raj casually turned so he could take in the tall man. Sheldon seemed normal enough although he did have an enormous stack of napkins on his tray.

“Green Lantern shirt. Nice,” he said as he returned to his friends.
“No wonder he went on about the raisin count messing with his fiber content,” chuckled Howard.

“Complete nut job,” agreed the experimental physicist. “So anyways, I was on the Star Trek message board last night and this guy was counting the amount of ethnic comments on the Original Series. He went into Scott’s use of ‘haggis’—”

Raj nodded. “And he calls his engines his ‘bairns’.”

“Then there’s Chekov with his ‘nuclear wessels’,” chuckled the engineer.

As the trio laughed Sheldon rolled his eyes. Chekov’s pronunciation was not an ‘ethnic comment’ in its pure form. If this was the type of precision thinking they did he truly wept for the department that hired them.

He heard everything they said—including their comments about him. Not that it mattered to Sheldon; he’d been called crazy more times than he could count. No, that’s not true. It was four hundred and sixty three if he just added up the word ‘crazy’. If he totaled the actual references to his mental state that’d be over a thousand.

Okay, twelve hundred and seventeen.

Of course the joke was on them. Sheldon’s mom had him tested and he had passed the sanity quotient. A sudden thought came to him that she never mentioned by how much but he shrugged it off as he moved aside his strawberry sundae. He’d decided to go with that after receiving no satisfaction regarding the rice pudding.

Sheldon pulled his Tardis pen out of his pocket and scribbled down bits of formulas on the napkins as he ate. Granted this wasn’t the time or place to be doing work but when an idea struck all else fell to the wayside.

“…Then Spock said ‘fascinating’ in ‘The Changeling’ so that’s thirty seven,” added Leonard.

“I think that about covers it,” said Howard.

Raj shrugged. “I think there’s more.”

“Any time you want to add more, go for it,” the engineer prodded.

“Let’s do another one,” Raj pouted.

“How about the number of times Chekov falsely attributes something to Russia?” offered Leonard.

“He said ‘Alice in Wonderland’ was Russian in ‘Who Mourns for Adonais’ and claimed the Garden of Eden myth in ‘The Apple’,” began the astrophysicist.

“There was the little old lady in Leningrad who invented scotch,” said Howard.

“I think there’s one more.” Raj perked up. “In ‘Friday’s Child’ he claims the phrase ‘Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me’.”

Leonard was satisfied. “Okay, next topic: how many ti—”

“Chekov also claimed Sherman’s Planet was mapped by Ivan Burkoff,” added a voice with a slight East Texas twang. The trio turned to see Sheldon in the midst of tossing out his garbage. “And if you include movies he also mentioned ‘Cinderella’ in ‘The Undiscovered Country’.” He
placed his tray on the counter and turned to go but instead halted and faced the other men.


Sheldon exited the cafeteria.

XxX

Sheldon entered 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue with a bag of Thai food and proceeded to get his mail before entering the elevator and pressing for the fourth floor. He dug out his keys from his pocket and when the doors opened he stepped out only to be distracted by movement to his right. He was stock still as he took in a young woman with blunt cut blonde hair that was much too blonde unless she was of Scandinavian descent which was completely ridiculous given her facial bone structure. She was wearing a baby blue t-shirt, cut off jean shorts like the type his sister Missy wore—although Missy’s legs hadn’t looked so…proportional—and flip-flops. The woman picked up a picture frame from a box and spotted the physicist in the hall. He lowered his eyes and made to turn away.

“Hi!” she said enthusiastically.

“Hello.” Sheldon went to unlock his door.

“So you’re my neighbor,” she grinned.

“As I’m opening the door with a key instead of kicking it in that would be a logical assumption.” He straightened and glanced in her general direction. “However I could as easily be a friend or relative looking after the apartment or else a mugger come to further loot his victim.”

She leaned against her doorframe. “I don’t think muggers bring take-out to the scene of the crime.”

“Point.”

“I’m Penny.”

*Drat.* He knew he should have left before they were officially introduced.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” he said evenly and went to enter his apartment.

“Wow. Nice to know there’s a doc around in case of an emergency.”

His hand froze on the knob. “I’m a physicist not a physician.”

“Ah. Math stuff.” A twitch seemed to pass through Sheldon’s frame before he again turned to her.

“Penny, it is my understanding that neighbors extend friendly banter as a courtesy.”

“Sure,” she said, although she was unsure as to where this was going.

“Please refrain from doing so. If you feel the need to blather it’s been my experience that Mrs. Vartabedian in 3A has an equal penchant for inane conversation.”

As she was wrapping her head around what he said Sheldon entered the apartment and closed his
As she was wrapping her head around what he said Sheldon entered the apartment and closed his door. He turned the locks and set the food down on the stand next to the door before pulling out an antibacterial wipe from the dispenser and proceeded to wipe down the locks and his keys before placing the latter in a bowl. Next he took off his shoes and reached for the Lysol spray and thoroughly doused them in the antibacterial cloud. He then sprayed his socks before taking up his shoes and food and stepping off the floor mat into his apartment proper.

He walked by the table and set down the bag of food. Sheldon then entered his room and set his shoes on the shoe mat in his closet and placed his messenger bag and umbrella in the plastic tub he kept for contaminated objects. He stripped out of his bus pants, adding them to the bin before dabbing his hands with sanitizer. Taking up the bin, the physicist proceeded to the bathroom and disinfected the items. He hung them over the curtain rod and then spent the next three minutes washing and rewashing his hands.

The lanky man returned to his bedroom and donned his slippers and padded his way to the living room. He took out his food packets before depositing the bag in the garbage. After cleaning his hands he grabbed a fork and bottled water from the refrigerator before sitting down on the lawn chair. Taking up the remote he resumed his Battlestar Galactica dvd with commentary.

As he ate he could hear his new neighbor moving boxes and whatnot around her apartment. With a frown he upped the tv volume. Perhaps it would have been better to move his chair closer in order to prevent future hearing loss but the chair was positioned in the optimal spot and he couldn’t bear to sit in a substandard location.

“I’m bringing sexy back,” came an off-key caterwaul from the hall. “Ooo. Ooo.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. He missed Louis/Louise already.

“Get your sexy on, go ahead be gone with it, uhh, uhh, uhh.”

With a growl the physicist set down his food and paused the dvd before getting up and marching to the door.

“Come let me make up for the things you lack. Ooo. Ooo.”

Sheldon traded his inside slippers for his outside ones and stepped out of his apartment and across the hall. Penny looked up.

“Hey,” she smiled. “What can I do for ya?”

“I’m not sure if the superintendent went over the neighbor relations and responsibilities in the lease but in case he hasn’t I’d like to remind you that there is a noise ordinance in order that all residents can enjoy their abodes in relative peace,” he said a tad briskly.

“Oh. Gotcha. Sorry about that. I’ll close my door.”

Sheldon gave a curt nod and went back to his apartment.

XxX

Sheldon’s Log. Star Date 060601.

Ms. Grant greeted me. Again. I shall have to bring it up with Dr. Hester but the man seems to be disinterested in the whole affair. No wonder he’s resigning as department head, he can’t resolve the simplest of matters.

I had enough of the cafeteria passing off their ‘rice pudding’ as the genuine article but received no
satisfaction from the kitchen manager. I wrote a letter to President Siebert regarding the incident and deposited it in his suggestion box.

I encountered Leonard Hofstadter and two associates in the cafeteria discussing Star Trek trivia. I had to correct them twice. It’s a good thing Leonard didn’t take the spare room. If he can’t remember the amount of times Spock said ‘fascinating’ he really can’t be considered a true Star Trek aficionado.

They all agreed that I was mentally unstable. They might mock me now but when the ‘rice pudding’ is rectified who’ll be the one to laugh?

I have a new neighbor across the hall. Her name is Penny and from her accent I surmise she originates somewhere in the Midwest. She’s also a deplorable singer and much chipper than I thought humanly possible outside of intoxication.

Bowel movements normal.

Temperature normal.

End Log.

xTBBTx

Sheldon’s lips were pursed as he made his way down the hall. He wasn’t a particular fan of the experimental physics wing—or experimental physicists in general—but need forced his hand.

He stopped in front of an open door and saw a brown curly-haired woman with glasses lining up a cup of ramen noodles in front of a laser.

Knock Knock Knock “Dr. Winkle.”

“Just a moment.”

Knock Knock Knock “Dr. Winkle.”

Leslie Winkle looked over at the gangly man wearing a Flash t-shirt and brown plaid pants with a frown.

“A minute,” she hissed as she went to the laser and turned it on for a second and a half. Smiling, she reached for the hot cup of noodles. “Yes?” Sheldon didn’t say anything. “Hello there!”

“You said you needed a minute,” he replied evenly.

“Well, obviously I don’t.”

“This inability to judge time could explain the inaccuracies in your basic research.” He knocked three times. “Dr. Winkle.”

“What do you want?” she growled.

“I need the free electron laser.”

Leslie tore off the cup’s lid and blew on the noodles. “We all need the laser. Get on the list.”

“Yes, I’ve looked over this ‘list’ and reject this willy-nilly style of research,” said Sheldon as he folded his arms across his chest. “It should be based on scientific necessity.”
“So where are you on the list?”

“Fourteenth.”

“Sucks to be you,” grinned the optical physicist, garnering a glare.

“Dr. Winkle, while I’m sure you think your experiments are noteworthy the free electron laser is meant for significant research.”

“Excuse me?” Leslie jabbed her fork into the noodle cup. “Listen dumbass—”

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper.”

“Whatever. Get out of my lab.”

Sheldon looked dismissively at her noodles.

“Perhaps you should leave physics to the men so you can further explore your culinary skills in a proper kitchen.”

“Out!”

Sheldon was beside himself. “We’ll see what Dr. Hester has to say about this.” He stormed out of the room and made a beeline to the department head’s office.

“Hello, Dr. Cooper,” Shirley said from behind her desk. “Can I help you with something?”

“That depends. Can you give me access to the free electron laser instead of that meanie, Dr. Winkle? Of course not, you’re menial labor. As my Meemaw says why spend time with the monkey when it’s the organ grinder that runs the show.” Sheldon stepped beyond her to the department head’s door.

Knock Knock Knock “Dr. Hester?”

Knock Knock Knock “Dr. Hester?”

Knock Knock Knock “Dr. Hester?”

Silence

“I know you’re in there. I heard you sigh.”

“Come in Dr. Cooper,” came the weary response.

Sheldon entered the office to find Dr. Gavin Hester working at his laptop.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the physicist said. “I didn’t know you were working.” Pause. “Of course I doubt it’s anything significant so I’ll only be a moment. Dr. Winkle is being uncooperative.”

Dr. Hester raised his glasses high on his balding head and sat back in his chair.

“What did she do?” he asked.

“She won’t give me her spot in line to use the free electron laser.”

“There’s a reason why we have a sign up sheet, Dr. Cooper. It staves off disputes.”
Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Having the ability to sign one’s name on a sheet is hardly a rational way to distribute a valuable resource.”

Dr. Hester inwardly sighed. “So what do you propose?”

“Each candidate should submit a one thousand word synopsis of his or her research so that an order can be assigned according to merit.”

“And just who is supposed to judge merit?”

“Normally that would fall under your paradigm as department head but from your disinterest in continuing your role much less delve into current research I doubt you’d be able to keep up,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Well I’ll ‘keep’ that in mind the next time we have a signup for equipment,” Dr. Hester said curtly.

“Next time?” squawked the lanky man. “What about this time?”

“We’ll just have to go with it for now.”

“Go with it? What kind of hippy dippy science is that? ‘Go with it’. Yes, let’s just go with the early Church that the Earth was the center of the universe,” Sheldon said excitedly. “Or perhaps we’ll just concede that Einstein was right and that the universe is a cosmological constant despite the fact we all know it’s expanding.”

“Dr. Cooper, aside from bumping Dr. Winkle in line for the laser—which I’m not going to do—is there anything else you need?”

“What I need is a better department head,” growled Sheldon as he stomped out of the room.

Dr. Hester sighed and ran a hand over his bald spot. Only two more months and he was out of there.

XxX

Penny entered the apartment lobby after a long shift at work. All she wanted to do was clean up and get things lined up for the weekend since this was her first one off in months. She took in Sheldon standing in front of the elevator with a package in hand and a messenger bag slung across his body.

“Hey Sheldon,” she said cheerily as she stepped beside him.

“Dr. Cooper,” he amended evenly without looking at her.

The elevator door opened and they both stepped in. It was in such close proximity that he noticed the faint smell of cheesecake emanating off his neighbor. His eyes flickered over her clothes and noted what looked like food stains on her yellow vest. She was more conservatively dressed than when he’d first encountered her although the buttons of her white blouse were strategically open to allow a glance at her cleavage.

Once at their floor the pair exited and went to their respective doors. Locks turned and in a moment the hall was empty.

Penny tossed her purse on the couch even as she slipped out of her shoes. Next to go was her uniform.
“Shower first. Food next,” she murmured to herself while pulling out her silky shorts and chemise from under her pillow. Her phone sent out a call letting her know that she’d received a message. She raced into the living room to retrieve it, hoping against hope it was Kurt.

It was Gwen, wanting to know what the scoop was for tomorrow.

“Damn,” Penny sighed as she flumped naked on the couch. Not that she wanted to actually talk to that cheating muscle-bound ass; she simply wanted her television.

She dialed her friend and waited.

“Hey, girlie, what’s up? … You bet I’m ready. … Are you serious? … Wow….”

xTBBTx

“I’m bringing sexy back,” Penny murmured as she stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She looked over her smoky colored eye makeup and rouge-a-licious lips. “Yeah.” The Nebraskan turned her body first one way and then another to make sure she fit properly into her thigh-high purple halter dress with a peek-a-boo front. “Let me make up for the things you lack.” She ran her hands under the tap before streaking her fingers through her blonde locks so that they’d remain straight.

“Hurry up, Pen,” Gwen called from the living room. “The booze is gone. We’ve gotta fly-y-y-y.”

Penny exited the washroom, grabbing her purse off the bed as she passed.

“I is here, bozz,” the Nebraskan teased. She took the glass offered by her friend and they toasted. “To hot guys and hotter cars.”

“Don’t forget hottest nights,” cackled the pixie cut brunette with an evil grin.

In response Penny downed her wine like it was a shot.

The two women exited the apartment.

“Mmm, something smells good,” Gwen purred as Penny locked the door. “Is that banana bread?” Her friend sniffed the air.

“Think so.” They waited for the elevator. “Guess Dr. C’s a baker.”

“Dr. C?”

“My neighbor. He’s a doctor.”

“Oh wow.”

“Not that kinda doctor. He’s just a math guy.”

“Ah.”

The doors opened and the ladies entered.

“Is he cute?” asked Gwen.

Penny recalled his blue eyes, broad forehead and pasty skin.

“He’s not bad. But then he opens his mouth and it’s game over.” Gwen wove their arms together.
“Well for us ladies it’s game on,” she laughed.

They got into the waiting cab and as she settled herself in the back Penny caught the eyes of the cabby in the mirror and how they took in every ounce of her and then some. She smiled wickedly at him as Gwen gave him the address for the club.

The cabby had to ask her to repeat the address.

Penny chuckled to herself. *Oh, it’s game on alright.*

XxX

The music pumped through her body as the Nebraskan twisted and turned on the dance floor. This is what she needed. After all these weeks of drama with Kurt and no time off at work Penny was about ready to pull her hair out. *I’m just a simple girl who likes her beer and Cornhuskers and that yummy guy in the Hilfiger shirt making his way to me.*

“Hey!” he called with a friendly smile.

“Hey yourself!” she replied.

“Having a good time?”

“The best.”

“Bet I could make it better.”

“Oh really?” It’d been four years since Penny had flirted with a stranger. She’d forgotten the thrill.

“Let’s start with a drink.”

Penny laughed. “A lot of things start with a drink.” She leaned forward. “I have to warn you I just broke up with my boyfriend.”

The guy gave a crooked smile. “If angry sex is what it takes to get you over him I’m willing to sacrifice myself.”

“Brave man,” Penny purred as she slipped her hand in his.

xTBBTx

*Next time remember sunglasses.* Penny was all squints as she stepped into the elevator. She so totally didn’t mean to go home with Cary? Cary? but he was so funny and uber hot that one thing led to another and—


All was quiet in the hall as she entered her apartment. Usually at this time of the morning she was out for her Sunday jog before doing the lunch rush at the restaurant. Granted, her normal rule was ‘nothing before eleven am’ but she found her Sunday jog really put a spring into her step at work. Plus it helped keep the Rocky Road off her hips.

She stripped out of her clothes and went straight into the shower. It was so different washing the scent of a man off of her that wasn’t Kurt. Not that Cary? was a bad lay; in fact he went beyond the call of duty several times as if trying to make up for the mistakes made by every man she’d ever met. *He gets points for enthusiasm. Too bad he had to work this morning.*
Penny turned off the tap and dried herself off before venturing into her bedroom and flopping onto her bed. She felt like she could sleep the day away.

TOOT! TOOT!

“What the frak?” she blurted as she looked around her room. Silence. Must be something outside. The Nebraskan rolled onto her side and—

TOOT! TOOT!

*That is a damn train!* She made to put her pillow on top of her head when it dawned on her that the apartment building was nowhere near a train track, so….

TOOT! TOOT!

She got out of bed, tossed on her pink bathrobe and went into the living room. It had to be coming from the hall. Her feet found the flip-flops.

TOOT! TOOT!

When she opened the apartment door there was the sound of a train clacking its way along a track coming from across the hall.

“Un-boleevable.”

She knocked at 4A and waited. No response.

“Dr. C? Could you turn—”

TOOT! TOOT!

“Hey!” Penny pounded on the door. Suddenly the lock turned and she was face to face with a train engineer complete with hat, overalls, red bandana around the neck and scowl on his face.

“Yes?” Sheldon said gruffly.

She took a moment to let everything sink in.

“What the hell are you doing?” she sputtered.

“It’s Sunday morning,” he said as if it was an explanation.

“And?”

“I test run my train on Sunday mornings.”

“Well, the whistles are kinda loud.”

“They have to be, they’re employed for safety,” Sheldon tsked. Penny rolled her eyes.

“Look, can you just keep it down a little? I had a late night and—”

“I have been here four years, two months and nine days. Every Sunday morning, aside from my trip home in oh three and last year’s run in with a rather nasty influenza on May seventeenth, has been designated train time. Moreover, you’ve already been here for two Sundays so you should know the drill.”
“I was out both weeks,” Penny snapped. “I’m here now.”

“Ah. Sounds like a scheduling issue,” nodded Sheldon. “Now that you know the routine you can make sure you’re away on Sunday mornings.”

“What?”

The physicist consulted his watch. “The nine fourteen is going to be behind schedule. Goodbye.”

“But—” The door closed. Penny blinked several times to make sure she got what had just happened. Train whistles. Engineer’s cap. Sunday mornings.

TOOT! TOOT!

“Wow,” spat the waitress before returning to her apartment.

xTBBTx

Star Trek facts: The Nitpicker’s Guide For Classic Trekkers
The Anyhoo Interjection

Reference to: ‘Pilot’; ‘The Big Bran Hypothesis’; ‘The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization’; ‘The Financial Permeability’

xTBBTx

Penny leaned the bag of groceries against the wall so she could get out her apartment key; at the same time a text message came to her phone.

“Terrific,” she hissed as she turned the lock and entered. After placing the groceries on the counter she pulled out her phone.

The message was from her agent!

She had another audition for Penny!

“Yes!” said Penny with a fist pump.

Things were going exactly like how her psychic said it would after the Nebraskan’s stretch of bad luck with Kurt. Penny flipped to her contact screen and called home.

“Hey Mama bird!”

“Hello ma belle. How are you? Did you get the cheque we sent?”

“Yeah. Just been too busy to cash it. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Okay. So. Another audition, huh?”

“How’d ya know?”

“You always have an audition lined up when you call.”

“Huh. Never knew that.”

“Too bad we never get a follow-up saying you got the job.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Just sayin’. … Penny, come home.”

“I don’t want to. Things are finally looking up.”

“Yeah but you’re all by yourself out there.”

“Just because I’m not with Kurt doesn’t mean I’m alone, Mom. I’ve got friends, y’know.”

“Part of the reason why we let you go was because of Kurt. Los Angeles is a dangerous place. Sometimes it’s good to have a man at home to protect you.”

“Even if he’s a cheating ass?”

“Well, no. But that’s just another reason why you should come home.”
“Mom, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m fine. My place is nice and…I’ve already met my neighbor. He’s a little odd but—”

“He?”

“Don’t worry, he’s not a creep. He’s a doctor, actually.”

“Oh really? Is he single?”

“He’s something. Anyhoo, I’ve gotta go. Cross your fingers for me!”

“Fingers crossed, my honey.”

Penny hummed to herself as she put her groceries away. First she’d make dinner, then it was into the tub for a soak and some lavender oil in the diffuser.

“I am going to get this gig,” Penny said firmly.

She had to.

xTBBTx

“Oh balls,” growled Penny as she checked her phone. Things were so hectic at work this morning she’d missed a call—and what a call to miss! “What the frak am I going to do?” She opened the glass door and entered the apartment lobby. *Maybe he’d…?* Penny snorted. “Yeah as if.” She checked the time on her phone and bit her lip as she ran through her extremely limited options. Her eyes spotted the parcel at the mail box and with a hopeful heart she picked it up. *Yes! It’s for him!* Maybe this wouldn’t seal the deal but it should at least get her foot in the door.

She entered the elevator and proceeded to her floor.

Penny took a breath before stepping over to 4A. He really was her only hope. She knocked and waited.

“Yes?” came a voice from behind the door.

Penny held up the parcel. “Got a package for ya. I—”

The door swung open.

“That’s my mail,” Sheldon hissed.

“I know. I saw it and—”

“You didn’t have permission to take it. You’ve interfered in the delivery of mail which is a federal offense and—”

“Whoa, whoa, easy there,” Penny soothed as she handed over the package. “It’s okay. Picking up parcels are just things neighbors do for each other. Nothing illegal.”

“So you claim,” the physicist mumbled as he checked the package for signs of tampering. “And FYI none of my other neighbors picked up my parcels.”

“Well that was rather unneighborly of them.”

“Actually it was more than acceptable. Hand delivering my mail sets up a dangerous situation whereby reciprocity and further communication is expected.”
Penny blinked. “Anyhoo—”

“How.”

“How?”

“You said ‘anyhoo’. It’s anyhow.”

“Ah.” Here she chuckled. “I know that. Anyhoo’s kinda my thing.”

“I see. Good evening.”

“Wait!” cried Penny even as she put her palm on the door. “I was kinda hoping you could do me a tiny favor.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“And so it begins. What is it you require?”

“I’ve got an audition this afternoon and the furniture company said they’re delivering my entertainment unit today at five thirty so I won’t be home,” she said a tad distractedly as she tried to catch Sheldon’s eyes. The physicist was having none of that, however.

“When and where is your audition?”

“Five o’clock in Irvine.”

Sheldon nodded. “You’re right. You won’t make it.”

*Here we go!* “That’s why I was hoping you could sign for it and—”

The lanky man shook his head. “Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“Please Sheldon.”

“Dr. Cooper.”

Penny adjusted the straps of her purse on her shoulder.

“You’ll be home and I can’t get anyone else to do it,” she pleaded.

“Penny,” the physicist said in a tone that made her think she was getting lectured by her high school history teacher. “By signing the document I make myself legally responsible for your item until you return.” Now it was her turn to roll her eyes.

“It’s no big deal,” she sighed.

“No big deal’?” squawked Sheldon. “Written contracts endorsed by a signature ensures a—”

“Look Dr. C.”

“Dr. Cooper,” he said tersely. “Is there something wrong with your aural or comprehension skills?”

“It’s not that. I—Look I don’t have time. I swear I won’t sue you if something happens to it.”

Sheldon slowly shook his head. “Oh if only it was that simple.”

“Please?” Green eyes met blue.
The physicist let out a big sigh.

“You’ll need to sign a contract. One moment.”

He closed the door, leaving Penny alone in the hall. She again checked her phone. *Okay if I leave now that means I take the I-5 S. That should give me plenty of time to find where I’m supposed to go.*

Time went by.

“Come on,” she murmured under her breath.

As if on cue the door opened and her weird neighbor stood before her in his black Superman logo t-shirt and red thermal holding out a clip board and pen.

“What’s this?” Penny asked as she took the proffered items.

“A waiver resolving me of all responsibility for your package in the event of loss, theft or damage,” Sheldon explained as she glanced over the document.

“Great,” she said as she signed it. “Here’s my keys. Leave it—”

Sheldon took a step back. “Your keys?”

“Well yeah, I can’t have them leave my stuff in the lobby. I’ll tell them to ring you and you can let them in and—”

“Oh, this is quite unacceptable,” Sheldon said excitedly as he took back the clipboard and pen.

“What now?” Penny sighed.

“You’re allowing access to your apartment. Suppose the delivery men incapacitate me and steal your valuables? Or you accuse me of theft?”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow even as his blue eyes flickered over her face.

“Hurry up,” growled Penny.

Again the door closed and she waited.

Five minutes later Sheldon opened the door and before he could get out more than “Here’s the—” Penny grabbed the pen and signed the paper without reading it and put the keys on clip board and handed the kit and caboodle back to the lanky man.

“Thanks Dr. C!” she grinned before racing down the stairs.

“Dr. Cooper!” he called after her before firmly closing his door.

XxX

The elevator door opened and Sheldon stepped out into the lobby to find two hulking men standing next to a large cardboard package he took to be Penny’s unassembled shelving unit. The lead man with a scruffy blonde beard handed Sheldon a clipboard.

“Sign here,” he said gruffly.

Sheldon glanced at the page and in that instant had thoroughly read the document.
“But you haven’t delivered the item,” he replied evenly.

“It’s here, isn’t it?” growled the delivery guy.

“That’s exactly my point,” Sheldon replied. “It’s here as opposed to upstairs in apartment 4B which is the address of the purchaser as indicated on your receipt. Until the item is there I can’t sign the form as the delivery’s incomplete.” The two delivery men stared incredulously as the physicist stepped over to the elevator and pressed the button. “Chop, chop, I have to order dinner.”

The two men grabbed a corner of the unit and made to follow.

“You’ll have to take the stairs,” Sheldon said as the elevator doors opened. “Your parcel’s too big to fit into the elevator.”

“Let us decide that,” the bald-headed mover snapped.

“Alright,” Sheldon said with an amused look and a Texas twang. “Let me just get out of your way.” He stepped into the elevator. “Fourth floor, gentlemen.”

The doors closed and he could hear the bald headed mover call him an asshole.

“‘Professional’ movers, indeed,” tutted Sheldon.

XxX

The director’s assistant came through the doors, taped a call-back sheet to the wall and retreated before a small horde of blonde-haired aspiring actresses pressed in to see if they were on the list.

“Twenty-two. Come on twenty-two,” mumbled Penny as her eyes scanned the list.

There was a twenty and twenty-seven.

No twenty two.

XxX

Sheldon turned on the light in Penny’s apartment and recoiled in horror at the sight of clothes and papers and ramen noodle cups and dirty dishes strewn about the place.

The two movers set the unit on the floor.

“Good enough?” asked the bald-headed man.

“Based on the conditions ‘good enough’ seems to be the apartment’s motto,” shuddered the physicist. He took a breath and stepped into the room so as to better inspect the package.

“Can we go now?” growled grizzly beard.

“It all seems to be intact, although I am putting in a note as to the tardiness of the delivery,” said Sheldon as he signed the form. Grizzly beard tore him a receipt and stormed off with his companion.

Sheldon stood there in silence in the midst of all this—chaos.

“Good Lord it’s like a mature throat culture in a life-size Petrie dish.”
Quickly he turned off the light and stepped into the hall. He held the keys between his thumb and pointer finger at arm’s length as he crossed over to his apartment. After a thorough decontamination of himself he deposited her keys in a zip lock bag and set it by the door.

“‘Need a waiver’ to enter,” he chuckled to himself as Sheldon sat at the computer to order his pizza. “Given the conditions of her abode how would she even know if she was robbed?” He selected his standard order. “Why would a person have a tray of eating utensils on her couch? And why does her couch face the door?”

Sheldon sat in his lawn chair and fitfully watched television.

“If anything she should insist on a waiver before anyone stepped into her apartment and twisted an ankle.”

He checked his watch before returning his gaze to the tv.

His mouth twitched and he gripped the arms of his chair to better control himself.

“Does she not own any hangers or a laundry hamper or a sack or a garbage bag or—” Sheldon stopped short and mentally counted to ten before turning to glare at his apartment door.

XxX

Penny dragged her feet out of the elevator. She had no idea how this day could be any worse. Not only did she not get the job, she was stuck in rush hour traffic, Kurt called to cancel on her again for getting the tv and the grocery store was out of her favorite cookies.

Her eyes flickered to her neighbor’s door. She’d get her keys later. Right now all she wanted was a glass—okay a bottle—of wine and her fleecy pants and—

The thought stopped where it was as she opened her apartment door, turned on the light and nearly dropped her purse. After a moment she rushed over to Sheldon’s door and loudly knocked.

“Sheldon!” He opened the door. “What the hell did you do?”

“I went to work. I came home. I ordered pizza with mushrooms, light oliv—”

“I mean my apartment!” the waitress gasped.

“Ah. Your entertainment unit arrived at five twenty three but wasn’t officially delivered until—”

“Sheldon, you cleaned my apartment!”

“Dr. Cooper and no, I didn’t ‘clean’ your apartment. That would require several antibacterial products. I merely organized.”

“You touched my stuff and”—here Penny blanched at the thought of her underwear strewn about the room—“oh my God, you didn’t go into my bedroom did you?”

“Certainly not,” said Sheldon with a look of distaste. “That requires a fortitude I don’t possess.”

“I didn’t want you to do this,” Penny hissed.

“I don’t want to live across the hall from a festering pool of entropic chaos,” the physicist sniffed in response.

“And you moved my furniture!”
“I optimized your living space.”

Penny stuck out her hand. “My keys.” Sheldon handed them to her—in a baggy. “Thanks for being the perfect ending to a perfect day,” she spat.

“You’re welcome,” he said and closed the door.

Eyes rolling, Penny returned to her apartment and flumped down on her newly repositioned couch. She took in her clean floor, stacked magazines on the coffee table and the assembled entertainment unit to her left.

“It does look better,” she conceded. A little laugh escaped from her lips.

“I wonder if he does windows?”

xTBBTx

Frowning, Sheldon placed his presoaked laundry in the laundry basket. This was hardly a time to have an epiphany. He gathered the rest of his laundry and ventured into the living room.

The whiteboard taunted him.

His eye twitched even as his lips pursed. He looked at his watch: eight fourteen. Sheldon proceeded out the door just as his neighbor was locking up her apartment.

“Hi,” Penny said amiably as she sauntered over in her platform heels to the elevator.

“Hello.” Sheldon did his best to will the elevator to the floor.

“Guess someone else has something on the go,” smiled Penny as she took in his anxious state. “I’m sure the laundry machines are empty.”

The physicist glanced in her direction. “Of course they are. I use them every Saturday at eight fifteen.”

“Ah.” Penny pulled at the cuff of her long-sleeved purple dress. “I’m going dancing. Y’know, not much to do tonight. You?”

“I don’t dance.”

The waitress giggled. “No, I mean what are you doing tonight?”

“I already told you, it’s laundry night,” replied Sheldon. “Although you should have been able to surmise that by the basket of dirty laundry and detergent I’m carrying.”

The elevator arrived and they both entered.

“I mean besides that.”

Sheldon cocked his head, noting the scent of green apple. “Is this banal chatter or are you genuinely interested?”

“Oh, interested.”

“Well, once my laundry’s under way I plan to mull further about the moment of inertia in gasses like helium at temperatures approaching absolute zero. Then when my laundry’s finished I’ll
spend the rest of my evening on the DC comics message board.”

“Sounds like fun,” Penny said diplomatically.

“Indeed,” he replied evenly.

The doors opened and the waitress got out at the lobby.

XxX

Sheldon tsked as he took a sip of his warm milk.

“‘John Byrne’s run on Action Comics was epic’. More like an epic disaster.”

Laughter came from the hall. Loud. A woman, Penny, and a man, unfamiliar. Sheldon checked the clock on the computer and pursed his lips. Now was not the time to be making a ruckus.

“That’s a strike,” he muttered before he resumed typing.

Cooperphd: Need I remind you of Byrne’s dismal attempt at casting Superman in a pornographic movie with Big Barda in AC 592-93? Complete and utter poppycock. How this man was ever given the reigns to….

xTBBTtx

*What the hell was I thinking?*

Penny’s feet pounded the interlocked path as she jogged her way through the park. The morning had been another disaster as she made her way home in last night’s clothing. She ran into Mrs. Vartebedian, who seemed bemused by the whole affair. Obviously the woman could read ‘wrinkled sexy clothes’ and surmise from there.

Zack was cute, sure, but that still didn’t mean she should have slept with him. The sex god must have agreed with that since the sex was okay but nothing spectacular. The only thing was, for that split moment it was wonderful waking up next to someone. Then reality set in—it wasn’t Kurt—and then she felt like shit. Not that she wanted the dirt bag back, it was what he represented: four years of comfort and protection.

She loved that asshole.

Now she was spending her free nights at dance clubs picking up anyone who tickled her fancy. The only thing was she felt so damn empty by morning.

As she glanced around the park she noted a tall man wearing a bright yellow shirt standing in the central part of the park. *That’s Dr. C.* He was looking up so Penny did as well and spotted a red kite. *At least he gets out for fresh air.* Given his pasty complexion the Nebraskan thought he was one of those guys who only went outside for necessities like work or groceries. No, check that. She’d arrived home from work one Friday evening just as Grocery Gateway was delivering an order to 4A. Then there were all those packages he kept getting. *I wonder what he does in his apartment?* Visions of her neighbor sitting at a computer discovering absolute zero or whatever it was he said he was doing came to mind. *Don’t forget the trains.*

Penny snorted and checked her watch before picking up her pace.

XxX
*Asshole,* Penny thought for the third time in the past half hour. She entered the lobby carrying her purse and two bottles of red wine.

“No, check that. Stupid asshole,” she mumbled. She glanced at the mailbox but decided to get the bills—because that’s all that seemed to come nowadays—later. She stepped into the elevator and let out a growl.

Kurt had come to the Cheesecake Factory. At the sight of him Penny could have kicked herself for thinking maybe he was there to apologize. *God, why do I give these sleazebags second chances?* Then she got a hold of herself and remembered all the texts she sent him about the television. Then there was the fourteen hundred bucks he owed her for the traffic tickets but like she’d ever see that again.

All Kurt wanted was the blender. The stupid blender they spent four hundred bucks on so he could make his protein shakes. Penny had taken it when she moved, partially out of spite, and he wanted it. When she freaked on him about the television he said they could trade. *Finally!* Just then Brad the busboy came by and she asked him if he could help her move the television. That’s when Kurt said he couldn’t do it tonight and in that instant Penny knew, she *knew* he was going to fuck someone because he used the line he used to use with her when someone asked if he was available to do something:

‘Sorry, got things rolling tonight.’

“Sonofabitch,” she mumbled as the doors opened and she stepped into the hall to find her neighbor spraying his door with what smelled like javex.

“Spill something?” she asked as she took out her keys.

“Removing the accumulation of germs,” Sheldon said as he wiped down the door.

She stared at her own door. “What germs?”

“People brush their dirty hands against it or knock,” the physicist explained as he cleaned. “Even I’m to blame as I touch the door knob after being outside. It’s just asking for a contagion to compromise my immune system.”

“I don’t see the problem. I mean I’m out everyday and I don’t get sick that often.”

“More likely than not your waitressing exposes you to a plethora of foreign microbes thus increasing your antibodies.”

Penny turned to her neighbor. “How did you know I was a waitress?”

“I’ve seen you wearing the same apparel you are wearing now at specific times and days. Moreover, in the evenings when I’ve encountered you in the elevator you’ve been physically exhausted, often coated in different food stains and smell like cheesecake.”

“Ah,” Penny said a tad self-consciously. “Never knew you paid that much attention.”

“I’m a physicist. I pay attention to everything.” Sheldon turned the knob with the cloth and entered his apartment.

Penny turned on the light in the living room and closed the door. She still smelled the javex and so after depositing her stuff on the counter she lit a vanilla-scented candle. Next she ditched her uniform, giving it a sniff before sticking it in the wash. *Where the heck does he get the cheesecake smell from?*
Now in her comfy clothes she returned to the living room, got a mug and bottle opener and moved to the couch with her wine. She stared ahead at the empty tv stand.

“Shit,” she growled.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat in his lawn chair, a small smile on his face, as he watched Star Trek on the SyFy channel. Granted he owned all of the episodes on Blue-ray but there was something titillating about catching an episode on television.

There was a knock at the door. Much as he’d like to ignore it his mother didn’t raise an ignoramus and so he ventured over to take a peek through the peephole. On the other side was his neighbor with a blender in hand.

“What do you want?” he said brusquely.

“I hate to bother you but I really need your help.”

*Shelly, mind your manners. There’s a lady in distress.* He sighed at the memory of his mother and opened the door.

Penny smiled hopefully. “Hey. Um, my friend fell through so I really need someone to help me with my tv.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s at my ex-boyfriend’s place. He wants to trade for the blender. Like now.”

“I’m not a suitable candidate for physical labor,” Sheldon said.

“It doesn’t take Hulk Hogan. It’s more awkward than anything else.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll give you twenty bucks.”

“No.”

Penny sighed. “Please, it’s been weeks since I’ve watched tv and I can’t afford another television set.”

“I’m sorry but this doesn’t involve me.” Sheldon closed the door.

“Dr. Cooper, I swear I won’t bother you again.” Penny held her breath and waited.

Nothing.

She pulled out her phone. Maybe she could get Kurt to—

The door opened.

“No more chit-chat or social niceties,” the lanky man said seriously.

“Zippo,” Penny said earnestly.

“Give me a moment.” The door closed.
Two minutes later he returned wearing a tan windbreaker and locked his door.

“Thanks so much. I really”—she caught his frown. “Right. Zip it.”

They went down the elevator and to her car in silence. Sheldon opened the door and pursed his lips at the sandwich wrapper on the passenger seat. The waitress grabbed it and tossed it into the back seat. She caught his look of disgust and proceeded to sweep the front seat a couple of times with her hand and smiled. Eyes rolling, Sheldon got in and closed the door. He clicked into his seatbelt before bathing his hands in sanitizer.

Penny signaled and pulled into traffic. Sheldon took a quick inhalation of breath as she darted down the street and pulled to a rolling stop before turning right. This is a mistake, he thought as he reached for the dash to brace himself from the impending accident.

In her peripheral vision Penny caught the movement and so glanced at her companion. His eyes were wide and staring straight ahead and his mouth was partially open as if he were trying to maintain a steady breath. For a moment her eyes focused on his bow lips. *Too bad he’s whacked cause he’s kinda cute.*

Sheldon closed his eyes in relief as they didn’t rear-end the vehicle ahead when it suddenly stopped nor did they die in a head-on collision as Penny honked the horn and swerved into the opposing lane of traffic to get around it. As he glanced at the speedometer he noted a red light on the dash.

“Your ‘check engine’ light is on,” he said worriedly. He eyed his neighbor, who hadn’t responded. “I said, your ‘check engine’ light is on.”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk?” Penny said innocently.

“This isn’t idle banter; it’s about safety,” scowled Sheldon.

“It’s been on for a while so don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?” He stared fearfully at the little red light. “How long is ‘a while’?”

“I dunno. Three weeks maybe?”

“You realize that the longer you procrastinate the probability that your engine problem will worsen increases exponentially.”

“Eh, so far so good,” shrugged the Nebraskan, causing Sheldon to again roll his eyes. “Look, now that we’re talking there’s a few things you should know about Kurt.”

“I doubt it but go on.”

“He’s a bouncer and can be a real bully. Right now he’s being an ass so I don’t know how he’ll be.” Sheldon turned to eye her. “Not that he’s violent. Well not unless he’s annoyed or drunk and some guy pisses him off.” A twitchy smile crossed her lips. “Anyhoo, just let me do the talking, okay?”

“As you seem unable to stop talking I’ll defer to your expertise,” shrugged Sheldon as he looked out the passenger window.

“Yeah, yeah.”
They drove the rest of the way in silence. It killed Penny not to have the radio on but somehow she sensed that whatever Dr. Sheldon Cooper listened to it wasn’t Energy 103.9.

“You can’t park here,” said the physicist as the waitress pulled directly in front of the building’s entrance.

“Man, you’re just a fountain of gibber-jabber, aren’t you?”

As she exited the car she smiled as Sheldon squawked a “Me?!” After grabbing the blender out of the trunk they proceeded to the building.

“You’re between the ‘no parking’ signs,” he warned.

“I’ve got my hazards on so it’s okay,” she said dismissively.

“This whole enterprise is a hazard and far from okay,” mumbled the physicist as Penny got them buzzed in by her ex-boyfriend.

All the way up the elevator Penny felt a gnawing in her stomach. This had been her home for two years. She remembered how excited she was to finally be in L.A.; she was on the verge of achieving her dream of being a movie star.

Two years later and she was at her ex-boyfriend’s door with the weirdest guy she’d ever met.

Kurt took his sweet time answering and once he gave Penny the once-over for old time’s sake—*that woman sure has a body*—he took in the gangly man behind her.

“New guy?” snorted the bouncer with a smarmy smirk.

“My neighbor,” snapped Penny, pissed at his tone. *How could I forget what an ass he is?* “Look, can we just get this over with?”

“Sure.” Kurt held out his hands and the Nebraskan gave him the blender. Penny made to enter the apartment but he blocked her way. “I’ve been doing some thinking. I really spent a lot on you while we were dating.”

“You?!” she squawked. “Who’d eat two racks of ribs to my salad when we ate out?”

“Who skimped on the rent for acting lessons?”

“And who was short on hydro for the gym membership?”

“Stop it!” Sheldon said a tad hysterically. The ex-couple turned to see the physicist with his hands over his ears. “Disagree if you must but don’t argue.”

Kurt chuckled. “You better get Braveheart out of here before he wets himself.”

“Shut up, Kurt,” growled Penny. “Just give me my tv and we’re out of here.”

“You said you wanted a new start,” sniffed the bouncer. “Well start with a new tv.” He closed the door.

“Kurt!” Penny pounded on the door and jiggled the door handle to no avail. “Sonofabitch!”

Sheldon removed his hands from his ears.

“Looks like this trip’s for naught,” he said.
“Oh, it’s not alright. We’re not going anywhere,” seethed the Nebraskan.

“I have to work tomorrow,” countered Sheldon. “I need to be in bed by ten if my circadian rhythm is to be maintained.”

“Sorry. Didn’t know you had a heart thing.” The physicist looked at her incredulously as she turned to the door. “Look Kurt, I don’t care if I have to stand here all night—”

“I do,” said her companion.

Penny pursed her lips. “Look, just work with me, okay?” she mumbled to Sheldon.

“Take me home,” he glared back.

Penny closed her eyes and took a big breath.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Dr. C.”

“Dr. Cooper.”

“Yeah.” She scowled at the door. “It’s just that that idiot took everything when he cheated on me. I left it all behind in this stupid apartment and all I wanted, the only thing I wanted was my stupid tv.” Sheldon heard a slight hitch to her voice. “I mean it’s two years old and the first thing I bought so I mean it’s not like it’s worth a lot but I just wanted—”

Sheldon stepped by her to the door.

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

“What are you doing?” gasped Penny.

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

“Dr. Cooper, you don’t have to do this.”

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

The door opened and the muscular man folded his arms across his chest and glared.

“What do you want?” he snarled.

“I just thought you should know that while I was cleaning Penny’s apartment I came across a pile of receipts, one of which was for a television,” Sheldon said evenly. “It’s only a matter of calling the police to report a theft. I imagine a criminal record would be detrimental to your bouncing ‘career’.”

Kurt turned an unhealthy shade of red before storming off down the hall to his living room. Sheldon took a step into the apartment before turning to Penny.

“Coming?” he asked.

Too stunned to talk, Penny nodded and followed.

XxX

“That was amazing,” Penny cooed as she watched Sheldon attach the cable to her television.
“I have a working knowledge of the universe. Hooking up a flat screen television is hardly worth my efforts,” Sheldon sniffed. “And you might want to run a vacuum hose behind here.”

“Yes boss. And no, it’s not this that’s amazing I mean getting the tv in the first place.” Here she grinned. “I thought Kurt was going to have a stroke when you whupped his ass—”

“Language, Penny.”

“Sorry. It’s true, though.”

Sheldon stood and cleaned his hands with sanitizer.

“It was logical. Intellect always trumps physicality,” he said casually.

“Oh really?” smirked the Nebraskan. “So you’re telling me you could take Kurt in a fight?”

“I just did; it was a battle of intellects.”

“And if it became physical?”

“I have longer legs. I’d be at the stairwell long before he could catch up.” He made for the door.

“So I guess that’s that,” Penny said slowly.

“What’s what?”

“I mean us. You know, talking and whatnot.”

“One can only hope. Goodnight stranger across the hall,” said Sheldon as he exited the apartment.

Penny picked up the remote.

“Goodnight my hero in plaid pants,” she grinned as she turned on the television.
“I can’t wait until it comes out,” giggled Leonard as he stood in line with Raj assembling their lunches.

“What?”

“Well, it’s supposed to be a secret but a friend of mine at the OPERA said that they got a confirmation that neutrinos arrived earlier than expected.”

Raj dropped his jaw. “That would prove Einstein wrong.”

Leonard grinned. “Yup. My friend said he’d see if he could swing it that I go work there as a placement. I’m sure the new department head would go for it since it’d add prestige to the university.”

“More like ridicule,” said a voice from behind them. The two men turned to see Sheldon casting a derisive look. “I’m sure the result was an anomaly due to a miscalculation or misalignment of the experiment.”

“And how are you so sure?” bristled the experimental physicist.

“The numbers don’t lie. Neutrinos move at the speed of light.”

“All you theoretical physicists are the same: ‘the numbers don’t lie’. It takes you twenty six dimensions to make your theories work—”

“They *do* work,” the lanky man countered adamantly as he got a bottled water from the cooler. “Perhaps it’s your level of understanding that’s lacking.”

Leonard was incredulous. “Of all the pompous things I’ve heard.”

“Well it’s better than the ridiculous thing I’ve heard coming from you,” countered Sheldon. “You said in your initial phone interview that you were an experimental physicist. Why don’t you spend your time figuring out the properties of supersolids at the moment of inertia in gasses at temperatures approaching absolute zero. It’s not monumental science but at least it’s productive.”

“Whatever,” scowled Leonard and he stomped off. Raj shrugged at Sheldon apologetically and followed his friend.

“Can you believe that guy?” seethed the bespectacled man as he paid for his food.

“He does have opinions,” the astrophysicist said diplomatically.

“Opinions? How about complete and utter arrogance.” The two men made their way to the lunch table and sat. “A miscalculation or misalignment of the experiment’. Meh.”
“Well, it’s been known to happen,” Raj said as he separated his lima beans from his rice. “Besides, it wouldn’t be the same without you if you went to Italy.”

“Yeah I could always work on supersolids,” Leonard said sarcastically before taking a bite of salad.

“Great news, gentlemen,” grinned Howard as he sat at the table. “Well, first the dry news: Gablehauser is our new department head. As for the exciting stuff: there’s going to be a department mixer to meet-and-greet him.”

“So? I already know him,” said Raj.

“Yeah, but do you know all the single ladies in the department?” said the engineer with a glint in his eyes.

“Most of them, yes.”

“And the graduate students?”

At this Raj gave a pumpkin grin. “Alright! We are so there, right Leonard?” He turned to his friend. “Leonard?”

“Huh, yeah, sure,” was the distracted reply.

“What’s with him?” asked Howard.

“Oh, he had another encounter with the infamous Sheldon Cooper,” said the astrophysicist.

“Ah, well, anyways, Ma said you could come over tonight. It’s a chicken brisket.”

Raj smiled. “Sounds good. Leonard?”

“Yeah, sure,” replied the short man although his mind was more on supersolids than a Jewish meal….

XxX

Penny stepped out of the apartment just as the elevator doors opened.

“Hold it,” she cried and in response Sheldon held the ‘door open’ button. After locking up both Sheldon and she exchanged places in the elevator and hall respectively. “Thanks, Dr. C.” She winked as he flashed her a scowl.

The doors closed and the physicist stood for a moment, noting a vanilla scent in the air. With a sigh he unlocked his door and completed his disinfecting routine before checking the message flashing on his answering machine:

“Hello Shelly, it’s yuhr mother. Ah hope Jesus has kept yuhr well. Ah was at the Church the other week an’ they had posters up for the holidays. Ah’m really hopin’ yuh could come this time. They have a retreat at the Church we could go tuh”—here Sheldon rolled his eyes—“which would allow yuh to see the world with fresh eyes so tuh speak. Anyhows, just tossin’ it yuhr way. Take care ‘n’ we’ll talk soon. Bye.”

Sheldon picked up the phone and ordered his pizza for delivery. Afterwards he’d open his box of new comics and settle down to read. He had an itch to play Halo but as it wasn’t Halo night he’d just have to suck it up.
He turned on the television to the SyFy channel and watched Star Trek.

xTBBTx

With a sigh Sheldon entered the reception room. He had absolutely no interest in who was the new department head so long as the man allowed him to do what he wanted. Nevertheless Dr. Hester had insisted he attend—something about putting Sheldon’s name on the list to see the Cern accelerator—and so he did.

Sheldon checked his watch and decided fifteen minutes was long enough to stay and ventured to the food spread at the far end of the room so as to avoid the people milling about in the central area. He watched as Dr. Pushman came to the table and took up a small paper plate.

“Dr. Cooper,” said the plasma physicist amiably.

“Dr. Pushman.”

“Nice spread,” the older man said as he looked over the food. “Oh, I’m in the way,” he apologized and passed Sheldon a plate. “I’m up for seconds so just shoo me aside if you want something.”

Sheldon tentatively took the plate.

“You should try the shrimp,” the man continued. “Excellent stuff. Let me—”

“I’ll get it,” the East Texan said quickly. He took a toothpick out of a cut kobasa and used it to pierce a shrimp and remove it from the platter.

“The cheese dip’s also good,” Dr. Pushman said as he helped himself. “Want some?”

“No thank you.” Sheldon couldn’t risk someone double dipping. They might be a room full of scientists but he kept track of who didn’t wash their hands after urinating.

Noting that the shrimp were of varying sizes the lanky man scanned the tray to pick out the most uniform ones there.

Across the way, Leonard, Howard and Raj stood with drinks in their hands surveying the room.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Raj.

“We wait for another hour until the women are sloshed enough to hit on,” smiled the engineer.

“Howard, this is a meet-and-greet with our boss,” countered Leonard. “No one’s stupid enough to get drunk.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” said Howard. “Stand here all night?”

“I could always be your wing man,” offered Raj. “You know, the Brown Dynamite to your Hot Pants.”

“‘Hot Pants’?” smirked the experimental physicist.

“I told you I want a different nick name,” growled the engineer.

“You don’t pick your name, your name picks you,” tutted Raj with a hint of a smile.

“Yeah, well who called you Brown Dynamite?”
“That’s for me to know,” Raj muttered as he remembered the accident he had in his shorts when he was eight with his brothers laughing like hyenas.

Howard took a sip of wine. “Here’s the plan: Raj and I will cruise around looking for any woman who can’t keep eye contact or appears grossly out of place.”

“What about me?” huffed Leonard.

“Leonard, it’s called a wing man not men,” said Raj. “Besides, you already have a girlfriend.”

“I guess.” Leonard wasn’t sure how to classify his relationship with Leslie Winkle. As long as they were having sex she could call it whatever she wanted.

He scoured the room and was shocked to see a familiar lanky man across the way. “I’ll see you guys in a bit.” He made his way over.

“Dr. Cooper,” Leonard said as the theoretical physicist was in the middle of eating his shrimp. “I, uh, wanted to apologize to you for, uh, what was said. We both kind of lost our cool and—”

“No, you lost your cool. I was merely correcting your errors,” Sheldon replied evenly before taking up another shrimp.

“Anyways, I was thinking about what you’d said about the supersolids.”

“Helium in particular.”

“Okay.” Leonard thought for a moment. “I could see that.”

“According to my predictions at temperatures nearing absolute zero the moment of inertia changes and a supersolid forms.”

“I’d like to conduct the experiment,” the shorter man said. “This deserves to be proven.”

“It doesn’t need ‘proving’. I already said it occurs,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Well, I’m sure your word is good but the scientific community needs a little more than that,” Leonard said diplomatically.

“Yes, well I—”

“Gentlemen, what’s with the shop talk?” asked a tall man in a suit with an amiable smile on his face. “Eric Gablehauser,” he said as a way of introduction.


“And you are?” Gablehauser said to Sheldon.

“An actual real scientist.”

“You must be Dr. Cooper,” the new department head said diplomatically. His predecessor gave him a head’s up on the physicist.
“Pleased to meet you, Dr. Gablehauser,” Sheldon twanged. “How fortunate for you that the university has chosen to hire you, despite the fact that you’ve done no original research in twenty-five years”—here Leonard winced—“and instead have written a series of popular books that reduce the great concepts of science to a series of anecdotes, each one dumbed down to accommodate the duration of an average bowel movement.”

“Excuse me?” Gablehauser growled. “I’ve conducted many experiments over my years at MIT.”

“Dr. Cooper, be nice,” Leonard mumbled nervously. “He is our boss.”

“True. He does deserve respect if for no other reason.” Sheldon cleared his throat. “Yes I did gloss over your work and with all due respect I find you to be nothing more than a glorified high-school science teacher whose last successful experiment was lighting his own farts.”

“Well then, maybe it’s best you don’t work for me,” seethed Gablehauser.

“Well I approve of the gesture I somehow doubt the university will let you resign before your tenure even begins.”

“I’m not resigning,” amended the department head with a grim smile. “You’re leaving. As in fired. As in clear out your office and vamoose.”

Leonard dropped his jaw as Gablehauser stomped off.

Sheldon stood a moment in shock before walking stiffly out of the room.

XxX

Penny stood at the mail box sorting out her mail.

“Bill. Bill. Letter with cheque in it from mom begging me to come home. Bill. Bill.” She tossed out her junk mail for a local gym membership and real estate. “Well with this level of encouragement how can I fail?” she smiled grimly.

The lobby door opened and she turned to see Sheldon enter carrying a cardboard box. He made his way to the elevator only to stop as he read an ‘out of order’ sign.

“Elevator’s busted,” Penny said. “Super said it’d be a couple of weeks to get the parts.” Sheldon nodded.

“I see,” he said evenly. Penny passed by him only to stop at the foot of the stairs.

“Well, are you coming or what?”

“I’m pondering the implications,” he said slowly.

“How ‘bout this: get your butt in gear up the stairs or stand there until it’s fixed.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” admitted the physicist who joined his neighbor as they walked up the stairs. His box was open and Penny could see an assortment of knick knacks and files.

“Quit or canned?” she asked.

“Physicists don’t get canned,” sniffed Sheldon.

“So you quit?” Penny took in his silence. “Canned it is. Sorry sweetie.”
“No, it’s better this way. I’ve been working in an environment of inferior intellects who’ve stifled my brilliance.”

“There’s that,” smirked the waitress.

“Penny, I have an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven although my true intellect doesn’t rank on standardized tests and furthermore possess an eidetic memory.”

She turned her head to him. “What’s that?”

“I can recall everything I’ve experienced since the day my mother quit breastfeeding me.”

Penny smacked him lightly on the arm. “Get out of here!”

“It was a Tuesday and raining,” Sheldon began. “I woke up feeling peckish and cried for mother who came and gave me a bottle. I looked at her in confusion and she encouraged me to drink but it tasted nothing like her breast milk and that rubber nib on my lips couldn’t even compare to the soft warmth of her nipple—”

“Okay, okay, I believe you,” Penny laughed as they got to their floor.

“Never doubt me,” he said seriously, his blue eyes briefly catching her own.

“Well, I hope you find another job soon,” she said as she pulled out her keys.

“I’ll consider my options in the morning. Right now I’m late for vintage game night.”

Both doors opened and closed.

Inside the apartment Penny tossed her mail and purse on the couch and proceeded into the bedroom to strip for her shower.

*I wonder what he’s gonna do?* She couldn’t really say what the market was on physicists but she knew getting another job wasn’t as simple as going to the local job bank.

“Wanted, physicist. Must use big words and be totally dorky. Kite flying an asset,” she giggled as she stepped into the tub. Immediately a warmth came to her cheeks. She wasn’t picking on Dr. C; he was what he was: a totally anal and awkward genius with a thing for trains. A frown came to her as she shampooed her hair as she thought about how Kurt had treated him. Of course, Dr. C kicked his ass so there!

Penny had no idea whether to believe her neighbor about the memory thing but he didn’t strike her as the kind who joked around much. Thinking back to her earliest memory she recalled her father and uncle digging around the farm house. There was a board to walk across the chasm directly into the house and she’d often stand on it and peer into the trench to see what was going on.

After her shower the waitress put on her comfy pajamas and housecoat. Suddenly recalling Sheldon’s commentary from the stairwell she smiled.

“I’m feeling a tad peckish myself.”

She ventured into the kitchen and put on the kettle for her ramen noodles.

xTBBTx

“Finally,” Penny mumbled under her breath as she spotted the elevator repair truck outside the
apartment building. Not that she was out of shape but after slogging long hours at the restaurant her tired legs and achy feet longed for the elevator’s smooth ride to the fourth floor.

As she gathered her mail she noted the parcels for Sheldon on the table. Since the night they’d walked up together she’d seen neither hide nor hair of the physicist.

That was two weeks ago.

She scooped up his packages and mounted the stairs.

“Comics North, American Railroaders Association”—*oh joy more trains!*—“and Amazon. God this guy shops more than I do.” She paused as she thought about her closet of shoes and clothes. “Well, maybe not that much, but close.”

Rounding the corner Penny was nearly bowled over by the smell of cooked eggs. With each step towards 4A the smell increased. Between the javex and now this she was running out of scented candles in the apartment.

“Wonder if there’s something in the neighbor relations manual about stinking up the place?” Of course it wasn’t a combination of ether and ammonia like she smelled in her brother’s shack at the back of the property so at least she knew Dr. C. wasn’t cooking meth.

Her phone rang and she juggled the packages from her right to her left arm and dug it out from her purse.

“Hello?” she said.

“…Sorry babe, wrong number.” CLICK.

Kurt.

Penny set Sheldon’s packages beside his door where she’d placed all the other packages she’d gathered over the weeks. She knocked at the door.

“More packages, Dr. C. They’re piling up out here.”

Frowning, she entered her apartment and flumped down on the couch. Immediately she blocked Kurt’s number.

‘Babe’. That’s what he called her. What he used to call her in the old days, better days when they’d first come to L.A. with dreams of being so much better.

“Rat bastard,” she growled.

Penny scrolled through her contacts list to ‘Doug’. He was a surfer guy she’d met at the beach. Maybe what she needed was thirty six hours of mindless sex to finally get Kurt out of her head.

“Hello Doug? It’s Penny. We met at the beach. … Yeah, I’m doing good. Listen, I was wondering if….”

Penny stepped into elevator exhausted but tension free. The weekend was wild and Doug was an excellent lover but at the end of the day this was all their ‘relationship’ was ever going to be. So they spent the morning doing the dance of awkward smiles and insincere ‘I’ll call you’s as both knew they’d never top this glorious weekend. The elevator opened and she saw a young guy set
one of Sheldon’s parcel’s down on the pile. He smiled awkwardly at the waitress before he and his buddy tore down the stairs. Quickly Penny made a mental count of the packages—they were all still there—before opening her door. In two trips she’d gathered the parcels and brought them in. After writing Sheldon a note telling him to see her about his deliveries she stuck it to his door. She listened but there wasn’t even the sound of a tv. *Maybe he’s gone?* Only there was the egg thing Friday. Penny yawned as she went to her bedroom. She felt she could sleep for a thousand years.

xTBBTx

As the elevator neared the floor Penny could hear a man talking in the hall. Just as the doors opened she caught Sheldon’s door closing. The young man wearing a yellow short sleeve shirt and blue jeans smiled at her.

“Hold the elevator,” he said lightly.

“Excuse me, but were you just talking to Dr. Cooper?”

“Yeah. I was just making a delivery.” It was then that Penny noticed a logo on the man’s shirt for ‘PJ’s Pet Shop’.

*Nice to know he’s still alive.* “Ah, okay. Well, have a good one,” she said and let the man go. She went to 4A and knocked.

“Dr. C, you’ve got another package.“I

Nothing.

Penny put her ear to the door and could hear Sheldon moving around so he was obviously ignoring her.

She shifted his package to her other arm so she could fish out her keys from her purse and get into her apartment. She set the package down on the pile of parcels she had beside the television. Granted, there hadn’t been any deliveries in ten days but they did take up a lot of room. A scowl came to her face as she thought about the pet guy. *How come Dr. C will talk to him but not me?* Obviously the physicist wasn’t opening the door for conventional reasons.

“Time to think in ‘whackese’,” chuckled Penny as her phone rang. She checked the screen and grinned as it was her agent.

“Hello? … Great. … Sure I can do commercials. … Alright. … Nine fifteen. Okay, thanks.”

Penny hung up and was about to call her mother when their previous conversation came to mind. Instead she called Gwen.

“Hey girlie. Go another audition on Friday. … Yeah. I’ll have to ask Marie if she’ll switch shifts with me. … I dunno, do you think I should wear the pink one or the yellow?”

Penny walked to her bedroom, leaving behind all thoughts of Sheldon and his parcels.

xTBBTx

“I hear ya, sister,” mumbled Penny before munching on a couple of potato chips as she watched another model get evicted on America’s Next Top Model. For the past week she’d gone to work and then come home to junk food and cable television. Another audition without a callback. It was getting to be too much. She’d like to blame all this negative energy on Kurt but it wasn’t like she
was acting before they broke up. No, this was solely Penny’s fault for having her father’s feet and being ‘too perky’.

“If only I could have a break. Just one break. That’s all I need,” she said with a sigh.

The axed model was in tears as she gave her exiting remarks but it was the fierceness to her eyes that halted Penny in mid-chew.

“I don’t give a *beep* what they said I’m going to make it,” growled the model. “You haven’t seen the last of me.”

“You’re right,” Penny said, her heart suddenly feeling lighter than it had in a week. She rolled up the bag of chips and set it on the coffee table before getting up and dusting off any crumbs. Her smile became crooked as she looked around the apartment: clothes covered the floor, rum bottles and cola cans on the coffee table, empty Ben and Jerry’s containers and Ruffles chips bags on the counter.

“Time to get your ass in gear, Penny-girl.”

Her eyes rested on the pile of parcels and an idea struck her. Grabbing her laptop she sat on the couch and began typing, frequently looking up words on the thesaurus. She had the ‘net until the end of the month and then she couldn’t afford it. She wanted her cable.

After looking over the document Penny crossed the hall to apartment 4A. She could hear the tv on and so she knocked.

“Dr. Cooper?”

The tv turned off. She waited but no one came to the door.

“Ahem. This document advises the Space Taker, hereby known as Dr. Sheldon Cooper, that the Space Owner—me—has informed him both in writing and verbally that she has been storing his crap in her apartment so it doesn’t get stolen. If said property is not removed pronto I will begin charging a storage fee of ten dollars per day until the end of the month at which time the property will be sold for monies owing. Furthermore, should—”

The door opened and Sheldon stood before her wearing a light blue Bat-Man t-shirt over a green thermal and khaki pants. The rest of the apartment was dark save for darts of luminous lights around the room.

“I never signed nor verbally agreed to such a contract so it is null and void,” he said with a bit of a Texas twang. “If anything I could have you charged with theft for taking my packages without prior notification and consent.” In response Penny pointed to the note on his door. “Oh,” he said after reading it. “Well alright then.”

“Besides, for your information I stopped two guys from making off with your packages,” said Penny as she closed her laptop.

“You approached them by yourself?”

The waitress shrugged. “It was no big deal.”

“Penny, your Mid-Western instincts should not be followed here. While you are brawny for a woman averaging one hundred and twenty pounds—”

“Hey! One hundred and ten.”
Sheldon cocked his head. “I see; your self worth is intrinsically linked to your weight.”

“Anyhoo, back to your stuff,” growled Penny.

“Yes, your blatant appropriation of my mail.”

She rolled her eyes. “You could always say ‘thank you’.”

“I haven’t received my packages to determine their condition,” sniffed the physicist. “For all I know they could have been tampered with—”

“They haven’t been ‘tampered with’,” she glared before turning sharply and stomping into her apartment.

“Good, because I still possess my ‘Junior G-Man’ fingerprint kit.”

Sheldon heard Penny mutter “Whackadoodle” before she returned with an armful of packages.

“This is load one,” she said as she transferred them to the lanky man. As Sheldon set them on the coffee table she took a moment to look around the room, noting the lawn chair furniture, television and—“Oh my God are those glowy things fish?”

“Yes,” he said. He spotted her feet precariously close to the apartment’s entrance. “Don’t come in.” Penny noted his eyes on her flip-flops and she took a step back.

“But they’re glowing!” she gasped as he came to the door.

“Luminous. I read an article about Japanese scientists who inserted DNA from luminous jellyfish into other animals so it was a simple extrapolation to fish.” He took in his neighbor’s stunned expression. “Parcels. Chop chop.”

She darted into her apartment and returned with the rest of his mail.

“It’s like fairyland in there,” she cooed.

“I assure you there’s no magic here,” scoffed Sheldon as he deposited the rest of the parcels on the floor by his lawn chair. “What you’re witnessing is but a dabbling into the softer sciences. This doesn’t hold a candle to particle physics.”

She stared at the living lights. “You’re like one of those beautiful mind genius guys, aren’t you?” Penny said in awe.

Sheldon paused before taking a bowl with a luminous blue goldfish and presenting it to the Nebraskan.

“This will suffice as compensation for you housing my mail?”

Penny was stunned as she took the bowl. “How do I care for it?”

“Aside from its colouration it’s a standard goldfish.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said and with that closed the door.

The waitress took the fish back to her apartment. She moved aside the clutter on her coffee table
and set down the bowl. With a giggle she turned off the lights and returned to the couch to sit and watch her new pet. The goldfish was blue like the flame on her dad’s welder or a Christmas light bulb. Or Dr. C’s eyes. Penny smirked. Okay his eyes weren’t that blue but they were intense.

She stared at the fish.

She didn’t give a damn what he called himself. Sheldon Cooper was a magician.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Dr. C? Penny flipped back her covers and quickly got out of bed. Blearily she noted the time as she got into her housecoat and made her way to the door. Never in the entire time she’d known him did Sheldon come to her for anything.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she opened the door.

“Nothing’s wrong.” replied the lanky man. “It’s protocol to knock on a door in order to alert the occupant that someone’s waiting to engage in a social exchange.”

“It’s eight am.”

Sheldon checked his watch. “Eight fourteen. I suggest resetting your clocks. Now if we’ve concluded the banal chit-chat we can proceed to the purpose of my call.” He handed her a booklet complete with laminated cover.

“‘Care of Luminous Goldfish’,” she read. He picked up a large jug of water that was by his feet.

“You need to change the water daily. Use this and refill immediately as it has to stand for twenty four hours before use.”

Penny took the jug. “Uh, thanks.”

“I’ve also brought you some food. Please refer to the feeding chapter for amounts and frequency.”

Penny set down water and food on coffee table. “Thanks Dr. C.”

“Dr. Cooper.”

Penny smiled at him. “You know I used him like a night light.”

Sheldon nodded. “Sound application.”

“I call him Dr. Sea. You know, like the ocean, ‘cause it also sounds like you.”

“Be sure to read the manual,” he said with a twitchy mouth before returning to his apartment.

“Better be able to train the fish to wake up at eleven,” said the waitress as she locked the door and went back to bed.

XxX
I equipped Penny with provisions and a goldfish reference manual. Given her folksy vernacular I made sure the manual was written at a junior high level of literacy, providing detailed illustrations where appropriate.

She named her goldfish ‘Dr. Sea’—an obvious pun on my name as she insists on referring to me as ‘Dr. C’ despite my protests. Still it does provide me with a whimsical brand name should I decide to produce a line of fish night lights.

Bowel movements normal.

Temperature normal.

End Log.

Sheldon put away his book, turned off his reading lamp and settled into bed. He stared at the fish on his night table that glowed like kryptonite or playful green eyes.

He put on his sleep mask and slept.

xTBBTx

Penny came out of her apartment to see Sheldon locking up.

“Hey Dr. C,” she said brightly.

“I could have sworn we negotiated a pact of non-conversation,” the physicist said with pursed lips as he neared the elevator.

“Null and void. I didn’t sign it.” The waitress pressed the elevator button.

“It was verbal.”

“Prove it.” A twitch passed over Sheldon’s face as the doors opened and they entered. “So where you off to?”

“The grocery store. Grocery Gateway forgot my oatmeal in its delivery.”

“Then have something different.”

Sheldon snorted. “An’ then we cain all whup ‘round the fahr ‘cause daddy shot us dinner.”

Penny laughed. “You’re from Texas?”

“East Texas. Galveston.”

“Kewlies. I’m from Washington County which is just outside of Omaha.”

“A Cornhusker.”

“Born and raised.” The elevator opened and they stepped out into the lobby. “I’m off for groceries too. You can come if you like.”

“I’ve already got my bus pants on.”

“Bus pants?” asked Penny. The pair exited the building and headed to her car.
“A second pair put over the first to protect against germs, gum and whatnot when one is taking the bus,” Sheldon explained.

“Of course,” his companion said with a little smile.

Sheldon adjusted his backpack. “Which grocery store are you going to? The Grocer Mart has a better meat selection but manhandles its vegetables.”

“I’m off to Market Square.” Penny unlocked her car and got in.

“The Market Square is neither a market nor a square,” sniffed the physicist.

“Suit yourself.” Penny started the engine.

Sheldon paused before opening the passenger door.

“I suppose I can see what these hippies pass off for oatmeal,” he said as he got in.

“Not wiping down the seat?” Penny lightly teased as she put the car in gear and drove off. “Ah wait. Bus pants.”

“Indeed,” replied Sheldon as he cleaned his hands with sanitizer. He glanced at the dash and frowned. “I see you haven’t had your engine checked.”

“Been kinda busy lately.” She changed lanes and picked up speed to beat the light.

“There’s nothing more important than safety,” gasped Sheldon as he sat back in his seat. “Good Lord woman you’re going to get us killed!”

“No I’m not. Quit overreacting.”

“‘Overreacting’? Penny, we’re driving at—sixty?!” He turned to her. “The speed limit’s fifty. Twenty five when we hit the business district.”

“I know that.”

“No, obviously you don’t since we’re going ten miles over the limit,” countered Sheldon.

“I’m going with the flow of traffic. It’s no biggie.”

“You’re right; combined with your propensity to tailgate it’s downright catastrophic.” He caught her rolling her eyes. “Just taking into consideration speed alone we’re traveling eighty eight feet per second. If the vehicle deceleration rate is twenty feet per second per second then stopping time equals eighty eight divided by twenty or four point four seconds. Since there is a two second delay in driver recognition and reaction time the total time to stop is six point four seconds. Furthermore”— He sucked in a breath as a car suddenly merged into their lane causing Penny to put on the brakes and honk her horn.

“Jerkface!” She glanced over and caught Sheldon’s white pallor. “See? No problem with reaction time.”

“We haven’t even taken into account the weight of your vehicle which I’d estimate at— Oh look, there’s a new putt-putt course!”

“You golf?” Penny signaled and turned onto a side street.
Sheldon nodded. “At least once a summer mother would drop Missy and me at Magic Carpet Golf to play the back nine which had a jungle-like setting.”

“So who won?” The Nebraskan pulled into the parking lot behind the grocery store.

“I did, naturally.” He scowled at her snort. “Golf is a game of angles.”

Both of them got out of the car and proceeded to the store entrance.

“And with his trusty ruler Captain Math once again ruled the day,” grinned Penny.

“Mock me if you will,” he sniffed. “But mathematics is the key to understanding the universe.”

“Okay, so how many seconds are there in a year?” She went to pull out a cart but Sheldon stopped her.

“Thirty one million five hundred thirty six thousand,” he said instantly as he wiped the cart handle with an antibacterial cloth.

“Nope. Twelve: January second, February second, March second….”

“Seconds as an allusion to dates instead of a literalism to a unit of time.” Sheldon let out a gaspy laugh causing Penny to smile in amusement. “So what are you getting here?”

“A few things,” she said as she turned into the pasta aisle.

“You don’t have a list?” he asked incredulously. “How can you shop effectively without a list?” Penny shrugged. “I just think about what I’d like to eat, see what I can afford and meet in the middle.”

“What about nutrition?” tsked her companion.

“Oh, I take vitamins for that.”

“Penny, Penny, Penny. Vitamins are a waste. Adequate nutrition provides more than enough vitamins.” He noted her putting a carton of ramen noodles in the cart. “Although in your case ‘adequate’ doesn’t even begin to describe your eating habits.”

Penny rolled her eyes and continued to shop.

XxX

“I’m not buying thirty five years worth of tampons,” she snapped as she unlocked her door.

“In the long run it’d be more cost effective and—”

“Later Doc.” She closed the door.

“Doctor Cooper,” he amended, annoyed both at her abrupt departure and further abbreviation of his title. He wasn’t a ‘Doc’ he was a scientist. A theoretical physicist.

Sheldon entered his apartment and cleaned himself off before setting the bag of oatmeal on the counter. He then changed and washed up before returning to fill the oatmeal container and toss out the package. After grabbing a bottled water from the refrigerator he sat in his lawn chair and turned on the television. His eyes drifted to the coffee table where upon was an assortment of papers, a writing pad and pen. At the far left was an envelope with a beautifully scripted ‘Dr.
Sheldon Cooper’ and a postmark from Galveston. He turned over the envelope so as to hide the familiar writing only to be faced with Meemaw’s hand-written return address. Sheldon placed the pad over the letter and in that moment another paper was uncovered:

I, Dr. Sheldon Cooper, am submitting a formal notice of lease termination for 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue apartment 4A as of September 30, 2006.

If you wish to schedule an inspection of the property to ensure that you are satisfied with its condition you may call me….

xTBBTx

Csgnetworkcom: Stopping time for vehicles

Profmattstrasslercom: OPERA: what went wrong?
Back from her run and stopover for a bear claw Penny had a quick shower and a bite of lunch.

“What to do, what to do,” she muttered. Yesterday had been awesome at the restaurant as the waitress had taken away a good chunk of tips. *Maybe go shopping?* Immediately she grunted at the thought. Shopping usually meant overspending and more credit card debt. No, she should most definitely stay away from stores.

Penny’s attention turned towards Dr. Sea as he happily fluttered in his bowl.

“Why not?” With a smile she made her way across the hall and knocked at 4A.

A moment and then Sheldon opened the door wearing a Red Lantern t-shirt, blue thermal, brown plaid pants and latex gloves.

“What ya doing?” asked the Nebraskan.

“It’s Thursday. I read comic books on Thursdays.”

“O-kay. Since you’re not doing anything”—here Sheldon twitched—“I was wondering if you wanted to try the putt-putt course?”

He turned his head slightly to the left in thought.

“That would be entertaining,” he admitted.

“So it’s a go?”

“No.”

Penny was confused. “Why not?”

“I haven’t scheduled it in,” Sheldon said as if it was obvious.

“This isn’t more craziness is it?” said the waitress with a crooked smile.

“Hardly,” the physicist sniffed. “Mondays I watch Star Trek, Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, Voyager and Enterprise. Tuesdays I play Age of Conan. Wednesday is Halo night and Thursday is comic book and movie night. I play vintage games on Fridays, watch Doctor Who, do my laundry, message board and blog on Saturdays and as you’re aware Sunday is train day with an outdoor constitutional in the afternoon.”

“Wow,” Penny said, stunned. “So what if you want to just do something off the cuff? Do you have a day for that?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed.


Sheldon was aghast. “But that’s comic book night.”
“Okay, then once a month and today is that day.”

Sheldon was unsure what to say. No one had ever sought him out for anything social that didn’t result in ridicule or bruising on his part.

She took in his tentative look. “The putt-putt’s my treat.”

“Why?”

Penny shrugged. “Why not? I have some extra money and thought it’d be fun to go. You said you wanted to try it too so why not go together?”

“That would be acceptable,” he said after a moment. “Let me put my comics away.” Sheldon paused. “This ‘Anything Can Happen’ won’t involve any kind of shenanigans or hooliganism on your part, correct?”

“No shenanigans,” promised the waitress, raising her hand in the air.

“Or hooliganism.”

“Or hooliganism,” she repeated. “Not even a humdinger.”

She smiled sweetly and he closed the door.

XxX

Penny shook her head in disbelief as Sheldon prepared to putt the ball. No matter how goofy he looked stretching and shuffling his feet and wearing golf gloves he was absolutely killing her on the course. He’d insisted on an official match consisting of two rounds and ten holes. It meant an extra twelve bucks but Penny figured it was still cheaper than a night out at the club where twelve dollars covered a single martini and she wasn’t the type to nurse a single drink.

Sheldon looked several times between the ball and the ramp with its teardrop-shaped loop. With a firm THWACK he sent the ball up the steel ramp, over the loop and then whizzing down the twister’s backside towards the hole.

“Okay, you’ve been here before,” Penny said accusingly.

“For the third time no, I haven’t,” replied Sheldon evenly. “Why do you keep insisting I’m lying?”

“Because you’re breezing through this like nothing.”

“Penny, through physics I have a working knowledge of the universe.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she growled as she took his spot and aimed her ball at the ramp. She gave it a firm stroke and hit the ramp but the ball fell before completing the loop.

“My turn,” said Sheldon in a pleased tone. He walked to his ball, aimed and dropped it in the hole.

The Nebraskan retrieved her ball and tried again, this time putting oomph to her shot. It hit the lip of the ramp and bounced back.

“As a fun fact Garnet Carter patented the first miniature golf game, which he called Tom Thumb Golf in nineteen twenty seven,” said Sheldon as he watched Penny get her ball.

“No kidding,” she said drolly and whacked the ball. It failed to make the loop. “Damn it!”
“Language, Penny,” Sheldon tutted. She turned to him with a smirk.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“I’m not unhappy,” admitted the physicist with sparkly blue eyes that belied his otherwise poker face.

“Okay genius, get me through the hole.”

He came over to stand beside her.

“You were correct to hit the ball firmly because a faster-moving ball experiences a higher centrifugal force which is used to counteract gravitational forces on the ball. The key to distance control is to roll the ball, not hit it. Now open your stance.” He moved his feet and Penny followed accordingly. “Now your weight should be slightly favoring your left side and your putter shaft leans towards the target. The open stances makes it easier to feel the—”  

Penny gave the ball a moderate hit and the ball went through the loop and down the course to the hole.

“Yes!” she hissed with a fist pump and skipped to the hole.

“—Left hand going out and down the target line,” completed Sheldon with a frown. “The forward lean offsets the four degrees—”

She tapped the ball plopped into the hole.

“Yeah, ok, I got it,” Penny said lightly as she retrieved her ball.

Sheldon’s face was a mass of twitches. “—Four degrees of loft which helps the ball roll smoothly.”

“Dr. C, it’s all good. Hole’s over. Take a deep breath.”

“You interrupted me,” he said crisply as the pair made their way to the next hole. “Twice.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “I got the gist. I didn’t need the Discovery Channel.”

“Fine. Live your life in partial ignorance,” sighed the physicist. “Let the ball move willy-nilly, without a care in the world.”

“It does care,” Penny snapped as she set her ball down. “It’s just not completely anal about a game which is being played for fun. You *do* know what that is, right Dr. Cooper?”

“Of course I’m familiar with whimsy.” Here his companion giggled in spite of herself.

“Whimsy”? God, you’re priceless.” She hit the ball and got it through the first barrier.

“What’s wrong with ‘whimsy’?” huffed Sheldon. “Would you prefer impetuosity?”

Penny stood back to let him putt. “‘Fun’ is a perfectly good word.”

“It’s juvenile vernacular.” His ball also made it past the barrier.

“Well are you having fun?”

“I’m enjoying myself, yes.”
A twinkle came to Penny’s eyes. “Say you’re having fun.”

“I just did,” countered Sheldon.

“If I make this shot you say you’re having fun with an f-u-n.”

“As you’ve had the propensity to defy gravity on your first shot all afternoon I highly doubt—”

The ball went over the bridge and plopped into the hole.

“Apparently all I needed was incentive,” Penny said with a pumpkin grin. “So Dr. C, are you enjoying this afternoon of whimsy?”

He glared at her. “I’m having…fun.”

“Well so am I,” she said sweetly as she made for the next hole.

Sheldon sunk his putt and followed.

XxX

“Let’s get something to eat,” said Penny as she put the car in gear and drove.

“Thursday is Souplantation night,” replied the physicist as he looked out the side window.

“Okay, where’s that?”

“Three oh one East Huntington Drive. Although it’s irrelevant since they already know where I live for delivery.”

Penny smirked. He would say that. “Here’s a thought: since we’re already out why don’t we just go there?”

“I didn’t bring cutlery.”

“I think they have spoons,” the waitress chuckled.

“Germs, Penny,” Sheldon said seriously. “If the dishwasher doesn’t reach one hundred and forty degrees Fahrenheit it won’t kill off bacteria thus risking E. coli or some other contamination.”

“Okay, forget utensils. How about Big Boy?”

“Tuesday is Big Boy night.”

*Wow.* “That doesn’t mean you can’t have it again,” she said gently.

“Now you’re just being silly,” he replied with a shake of the head. Immediately Penny signaled and turned left. “Where are we going?”

“Where anything can happen,” she said firmly.

Sheldon sighed. “Here’s hoping that doesn’t include botulism.”

XxX

“Did you know that the earliest mention of cheesecake is by the Greek physician Aegimus, who wrote a book on the art of making cheesecakes?” said Sheldon as Penny and he got out of the car.
“Can’t say I did,” she answered as they made their way across the parking lot to the Cheesecake Factory doors.

“Of course it wasn’t like modern cheesecake. The commonly used Philadelphia Cream Cheese is a form of pasteurized cheese developed by James Kraft in nineteen twelve.”

“You ought to be on Jeopardy,” laughed the Nebraskan as they entered the restaurant.

“I’m a future Nobel Prize laureate,” Sheldon sniffed. “The last thing I want in my biography is a footnote about my being the Jeopardy champion for two thousand and six.”

“Suit yourself.” Penny smiled at the hostess. “Hey Marie.”

“What are you doing here on your day off?” the woman asked.

“Girl’s gotta eat sometime. Besides, we were in the neighborhood.”

“No we weren’t,” countered Sheldon. “We were approximately eight point seven miles—”

“Anyhoo, we need a table for two,” Penny said as she lightly elbowed him in the arm.

“Right this way,” Marie said.

“You said no shenanigans,” growled Sheldon, rubbing his arm as the pair followed the hostess.

“How am I shenanigizing?” asked Penny.

“Shenani— Good Lord, that’s not even a word. I don’t know what kind of education system they have in Nebraska but it’s obviously lacking.”

Marie indicated a table. “Is this okay?”

“Most definitely not.” Sheldon scanned the room. “We’ll take that one over there,” he said. Penny shrugged at her coworker.

“Happy with this one?” asked the Nebraskan as they came to the table.

“It’s adequate.” Sheldon noticed Penny about to sit down. “Don’t sit there! That’s where I sit.”

Penny and Marie exchanged looks even as the waitress changed seats with the physicist.

“I’ll leave you to your server,” Marie said with a crooked smile as she left.

“Since I’ve never seen you in here you mind telling me why you have a particular table and seat?” smirked Penny

“The table is situated away from the high traffic areas of the bar and kitchen,” Sheldon said casually as he perused the menu. “The washroom is easily accessible as is the exit for emergency purposes. Furthermore, I’m seated facing the bar and ordering kiosk so that I can flag down a server should I require one.”

Penny shook her head incredulously.

“Is there anything about you that isn’t complicated?”

“My bowel movements,” he replied after a moment’s thought. “They’re regimented to seven fifty
“Never mind,” she said hurriedly as the server arrived.

“Hey Pen,” Janet said cheerily. “What’s up?”

“Not much. Just came back from mini golf and—”

“Are we here to order or socialize?” Sheldon cleared his throat. “You have lemonade. Is this freshly squeezed, from concentrate or powder?”

“Most likely powdered,” said Janet.

“Most likely’?” he said excitedly. “Beverages aren’t a game of percentages. Either it’s powdered or it’s not.”

“Powdered,” Penny said definitely.

“That’s too bad. In East Texas a housewife wouldn’t be worth her weight without a jug of hand-squeezed lemonade at the ready.”

“He’ll take a lemonade and I’ll have a diet Coke,” Penny said with a smile and Janet went to get their order.

“Would you like to select my entrée as well?” Sheldon said with a scowl.

“Maybe,” she winked causing him to purse his lips. “See anything good?”

He glanced at the menu. “There’s three types of soup.”

“No soup.” Sheldon opened his mouth to protest. “Soup is at the Souplantation. We’re at The Cheesecake Factory.”

“So by that logic I should order a slab of cheesecake? Hardly.”

“No, it means try something different.” She flipped to the entrée section. “How ‘bout a fajita?”

“Too messy.”

“Fish and chips?”

“What type of fish?”

“Tilapia.”

“Ah yes, the junk food of fish. I’ll pass.”

“What about a hamburger?”

“I already had one on Tuesday.” Sheldon caught Penny’s warning glare. “But as this day is chaos already I suppose my digestive tract should experience no less.”

“So are we ready to order?” asked Janet as she returned with the drinks.

“I’ll have the chicken salad, light Caesar dressing,” said Penny.

Sheldon closed his menu. “I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger so long as the meat’s
cooked at one hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Janet said as she gathered the menus, giving Penny a ‘where did you get this guy’ look.

“What you can do? It’s the minimum safe internal cooking temperature for ground beef.” He turned to Penny. “Why are we here?”

“It’ll be fine,” soothed the Nebraskan. “We’re not known for killing our customers.”

“The CDC estimates there are over two hundred and forty thousand cases of food poisoning a year.”

“That’s an estimate. It’s not like it’s a real number.”

Sheldon was speechless and Janet took this moment of distraction to depart.

“So anyways, how’s the job hunt going?” Penny took a sip of her soda.

“I haven’t really looked,” he replied neutrally although there was a tic to his right eye.

Penny gave a sympathetic smile. “I know it’s tough when you get canned but like I learned from doing auditions ya just gotta get back on that horse.”

“Really Penny? A horse analogy because I’m from Texas?”

“Nope. A Penny analogy thanks to a third place finish at the junior rodeo when I was twelve.”

The physicist nodded. “I’m sure your broad hands and feet were an asset.”

“Hey!” she said defensively.

“The feed or the interjection?”

“What?”

“We were talking about rodeos and horses. I wasn’t sure if you were extending the topic,” Sheldon explained. Penny pursed her lips.

“I wasn’t extending, I was ‘hey-ing’.”

“That’s not a word.”

“It is now,” Penny said adamantly. The physicist rolled his eyes.

“And yet another decline in the English language.”

“Words are made all the time,” she countered.

“I assure you the demand for ‘hey-ing’ will remain extremely low thus relegating it to the backwaters of English idioms whereas a practical term like ‘prevening’ shall eventually become commonplace.”

“‘Prevening’?”

“A term I coined to define the ambiguous period between afternoon and evening.”
Penny thought about it. “That’s clever.”

“Of course it is,” remarked Sheldon as their food arrived. He pulled out a bottle of sanitizer and cleaned his hands before lifting the bun off the burger. “Look at that,” he tsked. “Cheese, bacon and barbecue sauce when the logical order of assembly should be sauce, cheese and bacon.”

“You’re right. Completely changes everything,” Penny said poker faced.

“Indeed.” He picked up his burger. “This ‘Anything Can Happen’ is really out of control,” he muttered and took a bite. A frown came to his face as he chewed.

“Nope,” he said after swallowing. “Too disorienting for my taste buds.”

Penny set her fork by her salad bowl and got up.

“I’ll be right back,” she said with a frozen smile and headed to the bar.

“A shot of vodka,” she ordered and immediately tossed it back. Janet noticed her and came over.

“Who is that guy?” she asked.

“My neighbor,” Penny said as she wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“Okay, and now for the obvious question: why are you with him?”

“He helped me out.”

“Well here’s hoping you’re even,” murmured Janet.

Penny smiled stiffly at her coworker and went back to her table.

“So,” she began. Immediately Sheldon wrinkled his nose.

“You’ve been drinking,” he declared.

“Just a shot,” she said a tad defensively.

“Ah.” Pause. “You could have ordered your drink from our server.” He cocked his head. “Are you concealing alcohol dependency?”

Penny’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not an alcoholic!” she snapped causing the couple next to her to stare.

“Good. My father used to put his cheap bourbon in cans of soda but really he wasn’t fooling anyone,” Sheldon said and took a bite of his burger.

Penny didn’t know what to say.

XxX

“So let me get this straight, you were *teaching* at university when you were fifteen?” gasped Penny as the elevator doors opened at their floor. “In freaken Germany?”

“A visiting professor, yes,” agreed Sheldon. “It gave me a break before pursuing my second doctorate.”
“Second?” She put a hand on his arm as they stepped out. “How many degrees do you have?”

“A bachelor, two masters and two doctorates.” Sheldon gingerly extracted his arm from her touch. The waitress noticed this and quickly dropped her hand.

“Wow. That’s a lot of school. I, uh, went to community college myself.” *Please don’t ask if I graduated.*

“Ah.” Sheldon went to his door and unlocked it. He paused before turning back to his neighbor.

“I’m quite sure tonight’s bathroom schedule will be off,” he said evenly.

Penny laughed. “You’re something else, Dr. C.” She opened her door.

“Penny.”

“Yes?” For a moment his eyes met hers and she marveled at the blue.

“This day has been nothing but chaos.”

“Sometimes a little chaos is good for ya,” she grinned. “‘Night.”

Sheldon watched her enter her apartment and close the door before venturing into his own.

**xTBBTx**

Penny crossed the floor of the lobby to get her mail. This was the only time of the month she felt at ease doing so as her credit card statements weren’t due to arrive for another two weeks. As she threw out her junk mail she noted that the substantial parcel on the table was for Sheldon. She picked it up and went to the elevator.

“How much wool does a guy need?” she murmured to herself as she read the return address for Rosie’s Wool Emporium. This was the second big box from the wool shop she carried to the physicist’s door in as many weeks. He’d gone back to his old habit of not answering the door when she went to drop off the parcel. The only clue he was still alive was a continual clacking of wood emanating from his apartment during the day.

She arrived at the floor and set down the parcel at Sheldon’s door before knocking.

“Dr. C? Another package from the wool shop.”

Penny crossed the hall, unlocked her door and quickly closed it although she remained in the hall. Two minutes went by before Sheldon’s lock turned and he opened the door.

“Hey!” Penny said, startling him.

“Hello,” he replied as he scooped up the parcel.

Penny came to his door. “What’s with the getup?” she said as she took in his poncho complete with hood.

“Fruit of my labors,” he said evenly and made to close the door with his hip, thus allowing Penny a view of his room.

“Crap on a cracker, what is that?”

“A loom.” Sheldon placed his parcel on the coffee table.
“O-kay. Now for the stupid question. Why do you have a loom?”

“I was thinking about my luminous fish and then loom came to mind.” Penny rolled her eyes. The lanky man picked up a poncho from the arm of the couch and returned to the door. “Here, this is for you.”

“Thanks, Dr. C,” Penny replied as she took it.

“Dr. Cooper. Once again we are ‘even’. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Penny put her hand on the door. “Could you show me how it works?”

She felt his eyes scan her as if she was some sort of organism under a microscope.

“Take your shoes off and spray your feet with disinfectant before stepping off the mat,” he said at last.

The waitress stepped into the room, slipped off her flip-flops and sprayed her feet. She had no idea why she was there; all she knew was that her stomach dropped at the thought of Sheldon once again locking himself up in his apartment all by his lonesome. She took in his room and marveled at his shelves filled with more books than she’d ever read, a large plastic toy in the corner, a kick-ass telescope and whiteboards filled with math doodles.

“This is a treadle or foot loom,” Sheldon began as he sat at the loom. “Here we have four harnesses or shafts,” indicating the horizontal beams of wood at the top. “The warp comes to the front where I weave into the cloth. The beam where the warp ties at the front is the breast beam and from here the warp lines go through the reed, through the harnesses here and tie to the back beam.” He ran his finger along the metal slots of the reed. “The reed has different sizes of holes called dents. In this case it’s six dents per inch. Finer weaves can use up to one hundred dents. In fact, early treadle looms—”

“Wow,” Penny interjected, completely lost and bored out of her mind. “So what have you done so far?”

“A poncho for my mother, you and me, a seven foot throw and placemats.”

“That’s a lot of stuff. Maybe you should take a break. I mean, isn’t this supposed to be comic book night?”

“That’s Thursday. Tonight is Halo night,” Sheldon amended as he loomed. “Besides, I’ve missed six weeks of new releases.”

“So why not order them online? You get the rest of them in the mail.”

“Penny,” he sniffed. “They’re no longer ‘new’ so who knows who’s manhandled them, leaving fingerprints and creases in their wake as they bag them?”


Sheldon stopped looming. “There are.” He paused a moment before resuming his task.

The Nebraskan took in her neighbor looming away. *This can’t continue.* “Why don’t we go to one?”

“Alright.”
“I mean now.”

Again he stopped. “It isn’t Thursday much less ‘Anything Can Happen’.”

Penny gestured at the loom. “Yeah but tonight’s Halo night and you’re looming. That’s different.”

“Halo starts at eight pm.” He resumed looming.

A thought came to his neighbor and she smiled slyly.

“So you say you read comics on Thursdays.”

“I already established that, yes,” he replied absently.

“So what are you gonna do tomorrow since you don’t have any?”

“What I’ve done for the previous six weeks: read them online,” Sheldon said with a shrug.

“Yeah, but that’s not the same as having one in your hand. The feel of the paper,” she cooed.

“The smell.” Sheldon’s mouth twitched. “Yeah, you could read them online”—here she leaned closer—“but deep down inside you know you should be reading real ones.” The physicist turned to glare at her. “Come on, I’ll drive you.”

Sheldon stared at his loom in thought. “It would be nice to resume my collection.” Pause. “And Wednesday is new comic book day.” He stood up. “I’ll have to look up an address for a reputable establishment.” He took four placemats off the pile and handed them to Penny. “Payment in advance.”

“Thanks,” she replied and he bounded off to the washroom.

The phone rang twice before the answering machine picked up:

“Hello Shellybean, it’s your mother. Meemaw called to say she hasn’t received your monthly letter and wondered if you were okay. Call me and let me know what’s what so we can stop worryin’. Bye.”

The washroom door opened and Sheldon went to his room for his jacket, wallet and latex gloves.

“Let me check on comic book stores while you get ready,” he said as he entered the living room with his eyes firmly on his phone.

“Will do,” Penny smirked as she slipped into her flip-flops.

XxX

A grin came to Howard’s face as he flipped through the comic bins.

“What do Deadpool, Cyclops, Hawkeye, Black Widow, She-Hulk, Gambit, Wolverine, Hulk, Vision and Daredevil have in common?” he said lightly.

“Very funny,” snapped Leonard as he thrust a comic back into the bin.

“Cheer up Leonard,” soothed Raj. “Everyone gets dumped at some point in their life.”

“Leslie didn’t dump me. We were at different points so we moved on.”

“Yeah, Leslie to Dave Underhill and you to your palm and Emo music on your Ipod,” the
engineer chuckled garnering a glare.

“Don’t give up,” Raj said cheerily. “As I learned from ‘Eat Pray Love’ we should—”

Howard rolled his eyes. “Again with that book?”

“Howard, it’s going to be a classic. It pulls at your heartstrings even as it lightens your soul,” the astrophysicist sighed.

“That has to be the most….” Leonard never finished his sentence. Howard and Raj looked questioningly at him before following his gaze to the door. To their surprise stood Sheldon Cooper but he wasn’t the point.

The point was a hot blonde wearing red Capri pants and a low-cut yellow tank top standing by his side.

Penny held Sheldon back as she froze.

“Why are they staring at me?” she stage whispered as the patrons in the store had come to a complete halt.

“Considering the plethora of superhero paraphernalia surrounding them I have no idea,” breathed the physicist as his bright eyes took in everything.

A curly haired man wearing a Green Arrow t-shirt under a red plaid shirt came out from behind the cash and approached the pair.

“I’d ask if you’re lost but you’re friend’s wearing a Hawkman shirt,” the man said. His eyes crinkled in amusement. “Blink twice if you’re with him against your will,” he teased.

“Just the driver,” Penny assured him. She turned to Sheldon, who was in complete awe. “Well?”

“There’s so much to see,” he said excitedly. “I’m just deciding my course of action.”

“Get in there,” Penny said and gave him a little shove. Instantly he moved like a shot to the new comics wall.

“I’m Stuart,” the man said to the waitress. “This is my place.”

“Penny,” she said hesitantly. Stuart caught her concerned expression and glanced over his shoulder at his customers.

“Don’t worry, they’re more afraid of you than you are of them,” he said lightly.

“Yeah, don’t be so sure,” she said with a polite smile. “You sure have a lot of comics. Never knew you could make a living off of them.”

“Oh you can so long as you like eating Kraft Dinner a lot,” Stuart said with a wry smile, making her laugh.

“Yeah, I make a mean ramen noodle special, myself.” *Might as well get in the game.* “Well, I guess I’ll take a look around.”

“Sure, sure.” Stuart let her pass. “You’re beautiful,” he whispered to himself.

“Geez, you collect a lot,” Penny said as she noted the stack of comics in Sheldon’s gloved hands.
“These are just what came in this week. Limited series and one-shots aside I follow eighteen books a month,” he said absently as he checked the spine of a Green Lantern comic for cracks.

“That’s a lot of spandex,” she quipped.

“The Archies are over in the kid’s section. I believe they might be more to your liking,” he said stiffly. Penny glanced into the corner and saw a plump man with a Captain America t-shirt stuffed into his grey track pants staring at her.

“Na, I think I’ll stay here.” She glanced at the book he was holding. “So who’s the guy in green?”

“Green Lantern. You might have known that if you’d bothered to read the title above his head.”

“Yeah but he’s not carrying a lantern, smartiboots. He’s just a guy with a big nosed frowny face on his chest.” Sheldon’s mouth dropped as he stared at his neighbor.

“That’s *obviously* a lantern.”

“Oh yes, ‘obviously’. So why does he call himself that? I mean ‘Green Lantern’ isn’t exactly a tough name.”

Sheldon sighed. “While ‘Green Lantern’ is his superhero alter ego in actuality he’s a member of the Green Lantern Corps—an intergalactic police force established by the Guardians of the Universe. As for the lantern, it refers to the lantern-shaped battery that powers their rings.”

“And let me guess: it’s green,” chuckled Penny as she scoured the comics wall. “Good thing it wasn’t polka dotted.” Sheldon rolled his eyes but said nothing.

“Dr. Cooper?”

Sheldon and Penny turned to see Leonard, Howard and Raj.

“Dr. Hofstadter,” the lanky man said evenly.

“I didn’t know you shopped here,” Leonard said, taking a nervous glance at Penny.

“This is my first time—and most definitely won’t be my last.”

“That’s great.” Leonard swallowed. “I’m Leonard,” he said to Penny. “These are my friends Howard—”

“Howard J. Wolowitz. Enchante mademoiselle,” the engineer said smoothly.

“And Raj,” finished Leonard. For his part Raj waved his fingers then looked at the floor.

“I’m Penny. Dr. C’s my neighbor,” she said brightly. “So you’re a scientist too?”

“Merely an experimental physicist. Nothing to get excited over,” Sheldon said.

“I’m an engineer in the experimental physics wing,” added Howard.

“An oompa loompa of science,” sniffed the theoretical physicist.

“And you?” Penny asked Raj. He raised his head to stare at the ceiling. She looked to Leonard for help.

“He’s a little shy around women,” he explained. “Raj is an astrophysicist.”
“Ah. I’m an actress.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “I thought you worked at The Cheesecake Factory?”

“Well yeah,” stammered Penny. “But that’s just paying the bills until my career takes off.”

“Well that’s logical,” smiled Leonard.

“How is using a minimum wage job to support an unlikely career choice in any way ‘logical’?” sniffed Sheldon.

“It’s all about the dream,” the bespectacled man countered. Penny beamed at him and in that moment his knees nearly buckled as his armpits flooded with sweat.

Sheldon shook his head derisively before turning to Penny. “I need to search the bins for previous issues.”


“Like I said before: it doesn’t need verification but do as you will.”

“I’ll let you know about the results,” said Leonard. “I, uh, don’t have your number.” Sheldon said nothing. “My number’s—”

“I know your number,” the East Texan replied. “Unless it’s changed from two years ago?”

“No, no, still the same.” Leonard again glanced quickly at Penny. “So you ever get a roommate?”

“No,” Sheldon said.

“That’s good. I mean, not good because you were looking for a roommate and you didn’t find one but good as in you don’t have one now because I’m looking around for a new place to stay and maybe we could work something out,” gushed Leonard.

“You weren’t interested then. The dimensions of the apartment haven’t changed. Why would you be interested now?”

“It’s closer to the university than my current place.” He turned to Penny. “Are you on the same floor?”

“Across the hall,” she replied.

“Well that’s nice,” he said with a nervous smile. “I mean you being so close since you’re friends with Dr. Cooper and all.”

“She’s my neighbor,” amended Sheldon. “We have no further affiliation.” He checked his watch, noting that he was going to be late for Halo if he wasn’t careful. “I’ll call you on Friday regarding your results, Dr. Hofstadter.”

“Sure, sure. Bye Penny.”

“Bye Leonard,” she smiled and walked off with Sheldon.

“The roommate trick?” chuckled Howard. “Pretty smooth buddy.”
“It’s not a trick,” countered Leonard. “You know I’m always complaining about how small my apartment is.”

“But it means living with Sheldon Cooper,” warned Raj. “Are you sure about this?”

Leonard stared dreamily at Penny as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m sure,” he said adamantly. “And I call dibs.”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Miniature Golf
Marvel Wiki: List of Divorced Characters
Thefreelibrarycom: Newton’s Guide to Putt-Putt
Golf Digestcom: Putting with Dave Stockton
Youtube: Elizabeth Wagner: How to Weave on a Loom
As soon as Penny opened her car door it hit her: the smell of clean.

“What the heck?” She sat in her seat and closed the door. Immediately she noticed the sheen to her dashboard as layers of dust had been removed. Her eyes turned to the passenger floor mat, now spotless. Even the dead moth in the back windshield was gone.

“Son of a gun,” she chuckled as she put the car in gear and drove off.

She turned on the radio and began to sing in order to limber up her voice. There was an audition for a local theater company which was putting on a one night showcase rendition of ‘Rent’ and her horoscope told her that today was her day to shine.

Sheldon scowled at his whiteboard. The posit was wrong. Again.

He erased a particularly annoying set of numbers before beginning to pace.

“Yes, complete information about a physical system at one point in time should determine its state at any other time. Or, physical information permanently disappears, allowing many physical states to devolve into the same state,” he mumbled. At this point he was no better than a fence-sitter and that was intolerable. Sheldon Cooper always had an opinion.

“I’m definitely hungry,” he decided and checked his watch. It was time to get ready if he was to make it to Big Boy. He changed into his bus pants, grabbed his jacket and messenger bag and set off.

It had been two weeks and five days since the day of infamy where his digestive balance had been disrupted by an unscheduled hamburger. He thought for sure he’d require a laxative but fortunately he’d gone the next morning although the consistency was different. All it took was a higher end fiber cereal for the next two days and all was back to normal.

Except he no longer enjoyed his Big Boy.

As he chewed the famous burger he realized that its double decker formation meant a less satisfying meat to bun to condiment ratio. A subsequent meal only reinforced this new revelation.

Sheldon paused in thought at the bus stop.

Today was Tuesday and Tuesday was Big Boy night.

His taste buds craved a single decker hamburger.

The bus came along and people boarded. Except for Sheldon Cooper. Instead he ventured to the intersection and crossed with the light over to the opposing bus stop. He checked his watch. Given
the traffic flow to the restaurant and back it looked as though Sheldor the Conqueror would be late to the join the battle this evening.

This was another strike.

XxX

“Well that wasn’t too bad,” Penny said to herself as she drove to work. She didn’t make the cut but she really turned some heads at the audition once she began to sing. Maybe musicals were the way to go? Too bad she was already strapped for cash otherwise she’d enroll in some singing classes.

“Oh, well, guess I gotta rely on raw talent,” she grinned as she turned on the radio.

Penny did a few miles over the speed limit to get to work on time. She’d managed to have Bernadette cover two hours of her shift so she could go to the audition. In exchange the Nebraskan would take one of her coworker’s shifts as the petite woman needed time off to work on her grad school assignments.

After parking at the back Penny gave a ‘shave and a haircut’ knock at the kitchen entrance and was let in. She clocked in and washed her hands thoroughly in the sink before tying on an apron.

“Hi Penny,” squeaked Bernadette as she came to the back. “How did your audition go?”

“I didn’t get it but I’ve got a feeling that something good’s gonna come of this,” bubbled Penny.

“That’s awesome. Anyways, you’ve got section ‘C’.”

“Thanks so much for covering.”

“No problem.”

Penny made sure she had her order pad and pen set in her apron before commencing her shift. Almost immediately her eyes recognized her neighbor as he sat at their previous table.

“Hey,” she said with a grin. “Whatcha doing here?”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “I’m hungry. It’s an eating establishment.”

“But I thought it was Big Boy night?”

His mouth twitched. “It was—until you ruined it.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“I can’t believe you’re playing innocent when in fact you took me to your place of work and introduced me to a hamburger that is superior to the Big Boy.” He shook his head. “And here I was thinking that weekly coupons were an aggressive tactic to drum up business.” Penny snorted.

“I didn’t take you here to mess up your mojo. You just seemed kinda freaked about where you eat so I thought to take you here since I know it inside and out.”

“Oh really? What’s the expiry date on the coffee creamers?”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Lemonade, right?”

“And a barbecue bacon cheeseburger layered in the order of barbecue sauce, cheese and bacon.”
“One barbecue bacon cheeseburger. Slightly whacked. Fries or salad?”

“Fries,” he said with a scowl.

“Okay, well I’ll be back.”

Sheldon watched her as she moved first to the order kiosk and then the bar. She had muscular calves and a firm buttocks as well as a slight shift to her right hip that could potentially aggravate her L1 joint if she wasn’t careful.

Penny got his lemonade and returned to see him writing something on a napkin.

“Everything okay?” she asked as she set down his drink.

“Until such a time as the Higgs boson is discovered thus confirming through its mass that the universe at some point in the future will end in a fast-spreading bubble of doom quite like a Seven-Eleven slurpee.” Sheldon noticed the silence and glanced to see Penny looking at him strangely.

“More napkins, please.” He returned to writing. The waitress took some out of her apron and set them down to his left. She continued to watch him write, incomprehensible math symbols flowing from his pen.

“That’s all,” he said. Dismissed, Penny went on to her next table.

XxX

Penny brought her tray to the table to clear up after Sheldon had left. She opened the money folder to find the exact change for the bill and a note written on a napkin:

I specifically ordered a barbecue bacon cheeseburger layered in the order of barbecue sauce, cheese and bacon which I did not receive as the burger you gave me was most definitely stacked in the order of cheese, barbecue sauce and bacon.

As I also must include my bus fare in my expenditure for this evening I’ve decided to mitigate the financial loss by diverting your tip to my pocket.

Next time I expect my order to be correct.

Dr. Sheldon Cooper

“Next time?” Penny murmured.

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Penny unfurled herself from the couch and went to open the door.

“What’s up?” she asked as she took in her neighbor’s rather animated demeanor.

“It’s Wednesday,” he said. Penny’s eyes widened as she shook her head waiting for a prompt.

“New comic book night. Grab your keys and let’s go.”
"Wait, what? Dr. C. I don’t need any comics."

Sheldon pursed his lips. “You’re the one who started this entropic snowball down the hill so don’t try to get out of it now.”

“But I—”

“Why is everything a conversation with you?” he sighed exasperatingly. “The sooner we go the sooner I’m back to play Halo. I can’t make myself any plainer.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” In spite of herself Penny laughed.

XxX

“For the last time, Penny, just because your Ice Man Liddell is an accomplished mixed martial arts champion doesn’t mean he can ‘kick Superman’s ass’,” sighed Sheldon as Penny and he entered the comic book store.

“So you’re telling me ol’ Supes knows ju jitzu, muay thai kick boxing, wrestling and boxing?” the Nebraskan asked amusedly.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “The Man of Steel can’t be judged by human standards. He’s the strongest hero in the DC Universe and is virtually indestructible,” he explained while putting on his latex gloves as the pair crossed over to the new comics wall.

“‘Virtually’ doesn’t mean completely.”

“Superman is vulnerable to magic, various forms of Kryptonite, a red sun and arguably psychic abilities.”

“What’s Kryptonite?”

“The ore form of a radioactive element from Superman’s destroyed world of Krypton,” Sheldon said absently as he checked over a Flash comic. “It had a red sun unlike our Sol thus Kryptonians lacked the power Kal-El had on Earth.”

Penny chuckled. “So what you’re saying is that Superman can be beaten by Psychs, Spells and Rocks n Red Sol.”

The physicist glared at her grin as Howard and Raj made their way over.

“A red soul also means it’s primed for love,” Howard said smoothly as he sidled by Penny.

“Hey. Uh, you’re Leonard’s friend Howard, right?” asked Penny as she took a slight step away.

“Actually, it’s more like Leonard’s my friend,” the engineer amended. “It’s my posse and I’m the show if you know what I mean.”

Raj rolled his eyes and gave Penny a little wave before venturing off to the graphic novel section. There was no way he wanted her to think he was a part of Howard’s crew, especially when the engineer was having one of his ‘God’s gift to women’ moments.

“No, I can’t say I do,” the waitress said drolly.

“First of all your ‘red Sol’ allusion is ridiculous as Sol is the name of our sun—our yellow sun—and not a synonym for any ol’ star,” tutted Sheldon.
“I’m the Wolowizard of love and believe me when I say my wand’s always charged and ready to go,” Howard oozed to Penny.

“And you should know that a red sol doesn’t mean love it means that it’s a dying star in the last stages of stellar evolution,” the physicist said to the short man. “How you can be a doctor in engineering and yet not know this is extraordinary.”

“Actually, I’m not a doctor,” Howard replied sheepishly. “My Masters is from MIT.”

“Oh. Well, that explains your ignorance,” Sheldon conceded.

“I wasn’t ignorant I was being poetic,” Howard replied through gritted teeth. “Now if you don’t mind Penny and I are in the midst of pre-coital banter.”

“Oh. Well far be it from me interrupting your mating ritual.” Sheldon went back to looking over his comics.

“What?” gasped Penny. “There is no mating ritual,” she spat and stomped off to another part of the store.

“And so it begins,” grinned Howard.

Sheldon looked up. “What begins?”

“Amour. The heart’s tango.”

“Ah.”

Immediately Howard was serious. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Sheldon was confused. “Why would I mind?”

“Well, she is with you.”

“She’s my neighbor and waitress and driver to the comic book store,” amended Sheldon. “What she does with herself the rest of the time is completely of her own choosing and irrelevant to me.” He left the engineer to go pay for his purchases.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Howard said with a smirk as Raj came over to join him.

“What did you say to Penny?” the astrophysicist hissed.

“I was just establishing the parameters of our carnal rapport,” shrugged Howard.

“Yeah but Leonard’s hitting on her.”

“And where is he?”

“Doing Sheldon’s experiment.”

“See? Someone has to keep his priorities straight,” Howard winked. Raj rolled his eyes.

XxX

Sheldon and Penny were silent as she drove.

“Drat,” tsked the physicist. “I should have asked when Dr. Hofstadter gets home from the lab.”
He turned to his neighbor. “If I don’t see him next Wednesday I suppose you can ask Howard when you’re conducting the heart’s tango.”

“Conducting the wha?” Penny blanched. “Oh my God do you think I’m interested in Howard?”

“He seems to think so.”

“Wow.”

“So is that an affirmative?”

“Of course not!” Penny snapped. “He’s so totally not my type. I mean, he’s not athletic or cute in that rugged ‘I use Old Spice’ kinda way.”

“I see.”

“Not that I’m saying that I’m shallow or anything,” the Nebraskan continued hurriedly. “A guy also has to be kind and funny and have a sexy butt, y’know?”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Ah yes, Darwinism at its best.”

“Darwin?”

“The man whose contribution to science boils down to recognizing your desire for sexy buttocks as a product of natural selection,” he said drolly.

Penny didn’t get where he was going. “He’s some kind of butt doctor?”

“No, he’s not a proctologist. He was a nineteenth century geologist and naturalist best known for his contributions to evolutionary theory.”

“Oh, okay, he’s the monkey guy.”

“The monkey guy,” tsked Sheldon as he shook his head. “Yes, as much as Isaac Newton can be summed up as the ‘apple guy’.”

Penny grinned at him through the rear view mirror. “Is that the cute guy on the commercial? You know, ‘Hello, I’m a Mac. And I’m a PC’.”

“Newton’s been dead for two hundred and seventy nine years.”

“Ah, well you see I didn’t know that.”

“Obviously.”

A thought came to her. “So is he the guy they named the cookies after?”

“Oh dear Lord,” sighed they physicist.

“If you don’t know just say so.”

“The Fig Newton is named after Newton, Massachusetts.”

Penny shook her head. “Again, how do you know all this stuff?”

“As I explained I’ve an I.Q. of one hundred and eighty seven and an eidetic memory.”
“Yeah but things just didn’t fall into your head. What did you do, read an encyclopedia?”

“Among other things,” murmured Sheldon as he looked out the side window.

“Seriously?”

“I grew up in a Christian household. Mother didn’t allow much in the line of secular reading when I was a toddler.”

“Huh. I remember in primary school we used to look up swear words in the dictionary.”

“A valuable use of academic resources,” Sheldon quipped.

“Yeah, well what did you do?” Penny said with a scowl.

“Proved that algebraic topology can never have a non self-contradictory set of abelian groups. Oh wait, that doesn’t count. I was five when I did that.”

“Didn’t you do anything like, I dunno, make mud pies?”

Sheldon was horrified. “Do you know what types of bacteria exist in dirt?”

“Why do I have the feeling I’m gonna know now?” Penny chuckled.

“Mock me if you will but raw earth harbors contaminants such as heavy metals, bacteria from sewage or manure and parasites, especially roundworms from pet or wildlife feces.”

“I knew enough to stay away from manure. I grew up on a farm.”

“Oh dear.”

“What?”

“The potential for cross-species virus transmission is exceptional.”

“What?” She spotted Sheldon move as far away from her as he could. “I’m not infected with anything!”

“So you claim.” They pulled into her parking spot. Penny killed the engine and turned to her companion.

“You are something else, Dr. C.”

“Penny, just because I choose to acknowledge the inherent danger present in our environment doesn’t mean I’m anything other than prudent.”

“More like paranoid,” she muttered as they got out of the car. They walked to the front of the building.

“Why are you always questioning my intellectual authority?” Sheldon asked as he held the door open for her to enter the lobby.

“Your what? Look I’m no where near as smart as you are but I’ve been around the block a few times so I know b.s. when I hear it,” she said as she pressed the elevator button and the doors opened.

“You know a bachelor of science?” Sheldon paused as they stepped into the elevator. “That
doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Oh boy,” sighed Penny as the doors closed.

*Go out dancing or have clean clothes for next week?* Normally it wouldn’t be a choice but Penny really was scraping at the bottom of the barrel when it came to what was left in her closet to wear.

She got her laundry together and grabbed some change from her purse and made her way downstairs to the laundry room. Much to her surprise she wasn’t the only one doing laundry on a Saturday night as Sheldon was there busily loading the washers.

“Hey Dr. C.” Penny moved beside him and noted that all the washers but one were filled with laundry. “You sure take up the place.”

“It’s Saturday. Saturday at eight fifteen is laundry night,” he replied as he put his red Flash shirt in the washer before closing the lid and starting the machine.

Penny noted that the other machines were half full at best.

“You could always double up some of your loads to save some cash,” she offered.

Sheldon shook his head as he started his machines.

“Too many variables,” he explained as he pointed to each machine. “Delicates, whites, dark colors, light colors and towels and bedding.”

“Fair enough,” Penny said as she flipped the lid of the last washer and to Sheldon’s horror dumped in her entire basket of clothes. “So, any luck with the job hunt?”

“None are satisfactory,” he replied distractedly as he watched her haphazardly pour laundry detergent into her wash and close the lid.

“Why not?”

“Well there’s’s the commute for one thing. MIT is two thousand nine hundred and seventy nine point seven miles away and Princeton, two thousand seven hundred and thirty three.”

The waitress grinned as she started her wash. “Um, I think the idea is to move closer to them.”

“But my home’s here.”

“O-kay. Well is there anything close by?”

“There’s Stanford,” shrugged Sheldon. “It’d only be a ten hour and twenty minute commute.”

“Still kinda sucky.” Penny hopped on top of her washer.

“Hence my hesitation to accept.”

“You mean you got the job?”

“Penny, I’m a world-class physicist and future Nobel Prize laureate,” Sheldon sniffed.

“Okay then Dr. Nobel,” smirked the Nebraskan. “What are you going to do?”
Sheldon’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know. I’ve been mulling for several weeks but mitigating circumstances have forced me to accelerate my deliberations.”

Penny nodded. “Running out of money, huh?” He pursed his lips but said nothing.

“Is that why you didn’t write your Meemaw?” He looked at her in shock. “Your Mom called when you were in the washroom. It sounded like you’ve been avoiding them.”

“Which is none of your concern,” the physicist scowled.

“True.” She began swinging her legs lightly against the front of the washer. “Still, when things get crazy I always call my mom.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “My I.Q. is leaps and bounds ahead of my family members. What advice could they possibly give that I haven’t thought of myself?”

“Sometimes it isn’t advice; it’s knowing that people care about you and that you’ve got a place to go when the chips are down.”

“You mean return to Galveston?”

“Even if it’s for a little while.”

“I wouldn’t even return my lifeless corpse to that intellectual wasteland,” growled Sheldon as he folded his arms across his chest.

“Well ya gotta do something, Dr. C.” A thought came to her. “Hey, have you talked to Leonard?”

“We conversed last night. His experiment confirmed what I already knew.”

“That’s cool. But did you ask him about the roommate thing?”

“I don’t want a roommate,” Sheldon said firmly.

“You don’t have a choice, bub.” Penny hopped off the washer. “You need to be saving money pronto and a roomie totally halves your rent and bills.”

“Not all my bills. There’s still food, cell phone—”

She placed her hands on her hips and mock frowned. “Quit being difficult.”

“I’m precise, not difficult,” he amended.

“PotAto potAHto. Listen, it’ll give you more time to decide what to do. Just sayin’.” Penny headed to the door. “Oh, that reminds me I’m having a Halloween party on the weekend so things might get a little loud.”

“So long as the noise ordinance is observed at eleven pm I’m sure there’ll be no problem.”

“Oh yay. So what are you going to do?”

“As it’s Saturday I’ll be doing laundry and participating on the comics message board.”

“Ah.” She paused at the door. “You can come to my party if you like. It’s no big deal. Just a few of my friends goofing around in costumes drinking and dancing.”

He perked up. “Are the costumes random or genre specific?”
“I think people just pick them up at the Costume Depot. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

He cocked his head in thought. “What are the prizes?”

“Prizes?”

“For the costume parade. You know, most frightening, most original, most accurate visual representation of a scientific principle.”

“Sorry, sweetie but there isn’t gonna be a parade or prizes,” Penny said gently. “Just some friends getting together to have fun.”

“Well that sounds boring,” Sheldon said dismissively.

“We’re simple folk. See ya.”

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs,” she said slowly although she could already sense an argument in the works.

“But the sign says not to leave your laundry unattended,” Sheldon said adamantly as he pointed to the card on the wall.

Penny shrugged. “I’ve done it all the time and nothing’s happened.”

“That doesn’t mean that nothing *could* happen only that nothing *has* happened.”

“Well are you going to be here?”

“Of course.”

“Then you can watch my stuff,” she said with a pleasant smile.

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to assume responsibility for your apparel?”

“Yeah, what was I thinking?” Penny reentered the room and sat on a dryer. “So when’s the last time you went to a Halloween party?”

“I was ten. There was a Fall Festival at the Church.”

“Sounds like fun.”

He pursed his lips. “Hardly. It was a tedious night of bobbing for apples and bean bag tosses and pin the tail on the Leviathan. Not to mention it had a Noah’s Ark dress theme.”

“Aw, that must have been cute with all the little animals,” cooed the waitress. “What did you go as?”

“Homo habilis.”

“That must have gone over well,” Penny chuckled.

“Everyone kept calling me a monkey and trying to put me with Marcia Higgins because she was dressed like a primate,” the physicist recalled with a touch of disdain to his voice.

“Your family was pretty religious, huh?”
“’Pretty religious’?” squawked Sheldon. “Like the Grand Canyon is a crack in the earth.”

“So how did you get into science?”

“I’ve always been curious—and I was never satisfied with mother’s typical answer that ‘God made it so’, particularly as I read explanations in the encyclopedia. When I needed clarification I’d ask my Pop-Pop and he’d bring me to the library to look things up.” Penny noted Sheldon’s features soften. “Thanks to him I was exposed to the works of Newton and Faraday and Einstein and Feynman. He was the only one in the family who encouraged my scientific endeavors.”

“He sounds great,” she grinned.

“He was irreplaceable.”

Silence.

“Yeah, my parents are farmers,” began Penny. “Dad just didn’t get it when I told him I wanted to act.”

“It’s hardly a stable career path,” countered Sheldon. “His worry was justified.”

“Anyhoo,” she frowned. “The point is that I get where you’re coming from.” He snorted.

“What?”

“How many acting jobs have you had?”

“Well none yet but I’ve only been here a little over two years,” she said sheepishly.

Sheldon’s hands went behind his back as he raised himself on his toes. “Let me get this straight: I’m a scientific wunderkind who’s been the recipient of multiple awards and accolades and you’re an as yet to be employed actress and yet you ’get’ where I’m coming from?”

“Yeah I do,” she snapped. “And don’t be such a douche.”

“A feminine hygiene product?”

“It means you’re being an ass.”

“I fail to see the logic. A douche is used to cleanse the vagina not the anus. If anything I would be an enema.” Penny giggled.

“You’re awesome.”

“Of course I am.”

“And humble.”

“I’m merely being honest.” Penny’s phone rang.

“Hello? Oh, hey Gwen. ‘Sup?’” Sheldon rolled his eyes. Penny pursed her lips teasingly as she made her way to the door. “No kidding. Wow. Hey listen, I was thinking of having a Halloween party next weekend. Yeah. … I dunno, my schedule’s upstairs. Just a sec.” She turned to Sheldon. “Hey, I gotta go up for a sec so watch my stuff okay?”

“To reiterate—”

“Thanks Dr. C.” She darted up the stairs.
Sheldon glared at the open doorway.

XxX

Penny moved the phone away from her ear to check the time.

“Crap on a cracker! Sorry Gwen but I’ve gotta go. I left Dr. C. in the laundry room with my stuff and— ... Oh shut up! He’s my neighbor, smartass. ... Yeah, yeah, yeah. See ya.”

She hung up and got off the couch.

“Wow, that was a gab and a half.”

Penny opened the door to find her laundry folded in her basket.

xTBBTx

Penny wove her way around a young couple pushing a stroller as she jogged her way through the park. When she left the apartment she really didn’t want to go but fortunately she was the type of person who got an exercise ‘high’ so her enthusiasm increased as the miles went by.

The wind was picking up and on a hunch she went to the far end of the large grassy central field. Sure enough there was her lanky neighbor adjusting something on his kite. Penny stopped and began to stretch as she watched Sheldon stick something in the ground and then place the kite behind it, making sure the lines of the kite were taut. He then walked straight back fifty feet, looking around all the while to see if the coast was clear.

There was a pause and then he swiftly stepped back about three feet while tugging on the lines.

The kite was in the air.

Penny stepped off the path onto the side of the grassy hill and sat as she watched it ascend into the sky. At a certain point the kite stopped and seemed to hover in wait for Sheldon’s commands. The physicist was relaxed, his arms at his sides, and then he brought them forward and back. The kite gently flipped over and over and just as Penny thought it would crash it came out of its turn and returned to its previous height and hovering position.

As time went by Penny was absolutely awed at the command in which Sheldon flew his kite as he effortlessly made back flips and rolls and rotations. She gawked as with a sharp flick of his right hand a lazy back flip became authoritative spins as if the kite was a windmill.

Sheldon might be whacked but if he knew physics even half as well as he knew kites Penny realized he was more than a ‘math guy’ who liked comic books. He moved the kite through its paces, its angles precise and crisply executed. *I wonder what he sees up there?* Was it wind speeds and geometry? She wished she could see his face, wondered if he was smiling or stern in his concentration. *Does he know how beautiful this is?*

The kite moved in a gentle arc to the left towards the ground and with a simple flip it landed lightly on its tips.

Penny got up and dusted off her butt, noticing that several other people had settled in beside her to watch Sheldon strut his stuff. She shook her head. No, he wasn’t showing off; he was having fun. Only his ‘fun’ always seemed to incorporate perfection and precision. Total control.

*I wonder what he’d be like if he really let loose?*
“Dr. Sheldon Cooper—party animal,” she chuckled and resumed her run.

Penny looked at the couple with complete sympathy.

“This can’t continue,” she muttered and, pad and pen in hand, made her way to the table.

“So,” she said overly enthusiastically. “Are you ready to order?”

Lalita Gupta looked hopefully at Rajesh, who shyly shook his head. The woman sighed and got up from the table.

“Let me freshen up before we eat,” she said and departed for the washroom.

“You know you’ll have to talk to her sometime,” Penny said. For his part, the astrophysicist slumped in his seat. A thought came to the waitress. “Hey, maybe you need a drink to loosen up.” Raj shook his head, no. “It’s just a glass. What could happen?” He looked at her dubiously. “At the very least it couldn’t hurt,” she said with a shrug. Raj sighed and nodded, sending Penny off to the bar.

Lalita returned to the table and made herself comfortable. The couple smiled politely at each other.

“So how are your mother and father?” she asked. Raj gave her a shy thumb’s up. “That’s good.”

Silence.

“Here we go,” said a chipper Penny as she returned to the table with a green drink complete with straw and little umbrella. “A grasshopper for you.” She set it down in front of the astrophysicist, who immediately took a big gulp. “So to recap on tonight’s specials we have—”

“I can’t believe how much weight you lost,” gushed Raj to his dinner companion.

“Oh, well, thank you,” blushed Lalita.

“Because you used to be so very, very fat.”

Penny’s eyes widened. “Uh, the fish tonight is tilapia in lemon sauce and—”

“Yes I know,” Lalita said with gritted teeth.

“—Uh, there’s a steak special with—“

“Yeah, I guess it’d be pretty hard to forget, you know, being that fat,” said Raj before taking a sip of his drink.

“I think I’ll give you a few minutes to decide,” Penny said diplomatically and stepped away. She happened to glance at the bar and approached her lanky neighbor.

“Hello sailor, new in town?” she quipped.

“Hardly.”

“Didn’t know you were a drinking man,” she said indicating his drink.

“Virgin diet Cuba Libre.”
“That’s more like it. So what brings you here?”

“My usual table is occupied,” he said crisply. “I’ll have to see someone about permanently reserving it.”

“Eyah. By the way, thanks for finishing my laundry.”

Sheldon snorted. “Well it’s not like I had any choice in the matter. You put me in charge of your apparel and the laundry room closes at eleven. I hardly planned to spend the night there.”

“Nevertheless I owe you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already deducted the cost of the dryers from your tip.”

Penny curtseyed. “I live to serve.”

“I thought you wanted to be an actress?”

“Sarcasm Dr.—”

“Where are you going?” pleaded Raj.

“Home,” seethed Lalita as the pair made their way to the exit. “All evening you don’t say a word and then you’re an absolute boor. I stayed because our parents arranged the meeting but I’ve more than—”

“Princess Panchali?” gasped the East Texan. The Indian couple stopped arguing and turned to Sheldon.

“Forgive me your highness, for I am but a monkey, and it is in my nature to climb. I did not mean to gaze upon you as you comb your hair,” Sheldon said in a voice Penny had never heard. It was revering. Gentle.

Lalita was confused. “I’m sorry?”

“You are the living embodiment of the beautiful Princess Panchali.”

“Who’s that?”

“A beloved character from an Indian folktale. The resemblance is remarkable. I can practically smell the lotus blossoms woven into your ebony hair.” Penny picked up Sheldon’s drink and sniffed it.

“Oh really?” Lalita blushed softly.

“It was said that the Gods fashioned her eyes out of the stars, and that roses were ashamed to bloom in the presence of her ruby lips.”

“Don’t mind him,” snapped Raj. “He’s crazy.”

“Why, because he thinks I’m beautiful?” growled Lalita.

“No, because he’s Sheldon Cooper.”

“Hey there Mute-Boy,” Penny started.

“I’m not crazy,” Sheldon interjected indignantly. “My mother had me tested.”
Lalita had enough. “That’s it,” she said to Raj. “First you insult me and now this”—here she smiled at Sheldon—“gentleman.”

Raj’s jaw dropped. “He’s not a gentleman, he’s Sheldon Cooper! The guy who counts the raisins in his rice pudding.”

“I’m going home, Rajesh,” sniffed Lalilta.

“But we haven’t had dinner,” he pleaded.

“My appetite’s gone, taking me with it.” She stormed from the room.

Sheldon shook his head in amazement. “Exactly the kind of spirit with which Princess Panchali led the monkeys to freedom.”

“Not helping, Dr. C,” mumbled Penny.

Raj was beside himself. “If I die alone this is all your fault!” he snapped at the physicist before he stomped out.

“Wow.” Penny turned to her neighbor. “What did you do that for?”

“Do what?”

“You know, say those things to her: lotus blossom hair and ruby lips.”

“I was merely describing Princess Panchali,” the physicist said evenly.

“But she’s not Princess Panchali.”

Blue eyes met green.

“She is in some universe,” he said before turning to take a sip of his drink.

Penny felt herself flush. “I’ll, uh, let you know when your table’s ready.” He nodded and she took off.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Black Hole Information Paradox; Kryptonite; Charles Darwin
Cosmiclognbecnws: Will our universe end in a ‘big slurp’?
Spacecom: Red Giant Stars
Aboutkidshealthcom: The Hazards and Benefits of Eating Dirt
YouTube: Stunt Kite Flying. DPMama74
The Braveheart Misnomer

Reference to and dialogue from: ‘The Pancake Batter Anomaly’
Reference to: ‘The Middle Earth Paradigm’; ‘The Dumpling Paradox’
xTBBTx

Raj sidled up beside Leonard as the latter flipped through a comic bin.

“‘Penny’ for your thoughts?” the astrophysicist chuckled. In return Leonard gave him a dirty look.
“Come on dude lighten up.”

Leonard sighed. “I can’t believe I missed her last week. I mean suppose she met someone here?”

Raj glanced around the store, spotting Lonely Larry and Captain Sweatpants reading at the new comics wall, Stuart at the cash flipping through the Previews magazine and several other socially awkward men.

“I don’t think that’s a problem. Besides, Howard had her all to himself.” Leonard stopped flipping comics and closed his eyes.

“Aw, don’t say that,” he groaned. “I’ll be lucky if she wants to talk to any of us again.”

“Well it’s no big loss since she comes with a giant praying mantis,” Raj said crisply.

“What did Cooper do now?”

“Stole my date at the restaurant.”

Immediately Leonard brought to mind all the awkward interactions he’d had with the East Texan.

“Get out of here,” he chuckled and continued to flip through the bin.

“I’m not kidding,” growled Raj. “Everything was going well and then Lalita decided to”—here he paused—“take things elsewhere and we ran into Cooper at the bar. He totally hit on my girl and she left.” He sighed. “I still haven’t returned my parents’ Skype call.”

“Huh. Never would have pegged him to be a ladies man.”

The door opened and everyone in the shop turned with baited breath.

In came Howard and with that the anticipation popped like a balloon.

“Gentlemen,” the engineer said in passing as he went to the new comics wall to collect his books. In a flash Leonard was at his side.

“Okay Howard, what did you say to Penny?”

“Say?” Howard replied teasingly. “Only what was in my heart. And loins.”

“I called dibs,” snapped Leonard. “You can’t break the code or else ‘dibs’ has no meaning.”

Howard chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. Just think of me as a flower’s seductive scent that lures in the honey bee for some sweet nectar.” Leonard looked to the ceiling and sighed.
Again the door opened and in came Sheldon wearing his tan wind breaker, JLA t-shirt and khaki pants. Immediately he stopped as he took in the stillness of the store. He noted that people were staring behind him as the door swung shut. With a shrug he continued to the new comics wall.

“Watch it Leonard,” whispered Howard. “Here comes the lady killer.” His voice lowered. “Better hope he doesn’t have Penny in his sights.”

Leonard’s jaw tightened as both Sheldon and he looked at each other. The bespectacled man turned his head and went back to the comic bins followed by Howard.

Sheldon cocked his head in thought. Perhaps Leonard was of similar mind that not every meeting required a formalized greeting. He shrugged his shoulders and scoured the walls for the issues he wanted. As he selected, checked for flaws and picked another he could hear Leonard and his friends talking about playing Halo. Apparently they were involved in multiplayer games with their own rules and customized maps. Sheldon continued his task but felt a slight discomfort in his stomach.

“Off to do battle?” said Stuart as Leonard, Howard and Raj paid for their items.

“The campaign continues,” agreed Leonard.

“Well anyways we’re off,” said Leonard. “Same Bat-time. Same Bat-channel.” Stuart gave a slight smile.

“You’ll know where I’ll be since I have no life outside of the store,” he replied. “Or life at all.”

As he made to go Leonard noticed Sheldon looking at the group. Caught, the lanky man quickly turned away. The experimental physicist took in the lone figure.

“This is stupid,” he said and left Raj and Howard at the door. “Dr. Cooper?”

Sheldon turned to him. “Dr. Hofstadter.”

“Leonard’s fine.”

“I suppose although it didn’t make the top one hundred baby names of two thousand and five.”

“I mean you can call me by my given name, Leonard,” the shorter man clarified.

“Oh. Alright.” Leonard waited but Sheldon wasn’t forthcoming with his own name.

“Anyways, I’ve just about finished collecting the data from the experiment. If you’d like I can send it to you, you know, if you wanted to write it up. Or I can. I mean it doesn’t matter who
writes it up.”

“I’ll write it as I have the time,” Sheldon replied neutrally although Leonard detected a twitch to his mouth.

“Well okay then,” smiled Leonard. “I’ll send it to you when I get your email and—”

“scooperphd atyahoo dotcom.”

“Okay. Well I guess that’s that.” Sheldon nodded and went back to his comics. Leonard paused as he debated with himself.

“Dr. Cooper, I don’t know if you’re busy or not but Howard, Raj and I were going to play—”

His words died on his lips as the door opened and Penny entered wearing a pink mini dress with matching platform shoes. She strutted towards the physicists, Howard and Raj in tow.

“Ready to go?” she asked Sheldon.

“I believe so,” he replied.

“Hi Penny,” gushed Leonard.

“Hey Leonard,” she smiled.

“‘She walks in beauty like the night’,” came a voice from behind her.

“No she doesn’t, Howard,” Penny smirked. “And quit staring at my butt.”

“I hear and obey, mi’lady.”

Penny turned to Raj with a frown on her face. “You apologize to Dr. C yet?”

Raj dropped his jaw in shock and quickly whispered in Howard’s ear.

“But Cooper hit on his woman,” the engineer interpreted.

“Whatever,” the waitress said with a roll of the eyes. “They’d just met that night.”

“Love only needs but a moment,” countered Howard seductively. Penny put her hands on her hips.

“He kept bringing up how fat she used to be.” Now it was Howard’s turn to be shocked as both Leonard and he turned to Raj.

“You spoke to her?” the engineer gasped.

“Yeah, apparently lushiface here can’t keep a cork in it after a drink under his belt,” snorted the Nebraskan.

Raj whispered furiously to Howard.

“Well you’re the one who recommended he drink,” interpreted Howard.

“To loosen him up not turn into a colossal douche bag.”

“Well, to be fair, he is a douche most of the time,” Howard chuckled, garnering an elbow from his
best friend.

Penny cocked her head and glared at Raj. “Well?”

Raj looked down at his feet before glancing at Sheldon and nodding.

“So,” Leonard interjected. “Are you going somewhere tonight?”

“Me and a few girls are going out for a little dancing,” smiled Penny. “You know, girl stuff. You?”

“Ah, well, you know, going to hang out at Raj’s,” Leonard said with a touch of false bravado. “You know, doin’ guy things.”

“Pizza and video games,” grinned Howard. “Oh yeah.”

Penny grinned. “Sounds like you, Dr. C.”

“Speaking of which, we’re nearing eight o’clock,” sniffed Sheldon and went to pay for his comics.

“And?” prompted Leonard.

“Wednesday at eight is Halo time,” the waitress replied. “Hey, it’d be cool if you were roomies with him. Then he’d have a gaming bud.”

“I haven’t heard back from him, regarding the apartment I mean. I don’t think he’s interested.”

Penny leaned in to the short physicist. “Let me work on him,” she stage whispered.

“Penny, end the prattle and let’s roll,” insisted Sheldon.

“Night fellas.” She flashed a devastating smile and moved towards Sheldon and the exit.

“I’d like to inform you that we’re five minutes ahead of schedule so you don’t have to speed home,” the theoretical physicist said as he held the door open for his ride.

“Yeah, but the sooner I get ya home the sooner I can put on my dancing shoes.”

Sheldon paused. “But you’re already wearing your dancing shoes,” he said before joining her outside.

“I’d let her work on me,” oozed Howard. “All night.”

“That’s rude, Howard,” growled Leonard through pursed lips.

“So you’re saying you weren’t thinking the same thing?”

Silence.

“So who’s up for a little Halo?” asked Leonard as he quickly exited the store.

xTBBTtx

Sheldon frowned as he did his best to tune out the music, laughing and loud conversations coming from across the hall. No, check that, from in the hall as well and that was quite unacceptable. Not that the apartment doors were the best for repressing sound but they were at least better than
He got up from his computer where he’d been on his comic book message board for the past two hours and went to the refrigerator to grab an orange soda. Granted sugar after nine pm wasn’t a good idea but the physicist needed something carbonated to take the edge off.

There was a thump at the door as if a body had hit it and some giggling. Sheldon rolled his eyes. He’d definitely have to javex down his door tomorrow before he ran his train.

The door shook back and forth with a simultaneous intrusion of carnal sounds.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” growled Sheldon as he put down his drink and marched to his door. He hesitated as he realized he couldn’t just open it willy-nilly since the lovebirds seemed to be pressed against it.

Knock Knock Knock “People in the hall.”
Knock Knock Knock “People in the hall.”
Knock Knock Knock “People in the hall.”

Sheldon waited a moment before opening the door to see a dark haired guy wearing a Neo jacket holding a blushing high school cheerleader in his arms.

“Sorry about that bro,” the guy grinned. The girl laughed.

“Somehow I highly doubt that,” Sheldon replied crisply. “So which Neo are you?”

“You know, the one from The Matrix.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with The Matrix but there’s been two other films: Matrix Reloaded and Matrix Revolutions. So I’m asking again, which Neo are you?”

“Uh, all of them,” the guy said, although a tad unsure.

“So by that answer I’ll surmise you mean Neo from Matrix Revolutions.” The physicist turned to the girl. “In that case you shouldn’t expect much from your evening as your beau represents one of the most original concepts in recent science fiction who ultimately devolved into a colossal disappointment.”

“Hey bro—”

“I’m not your ‘bro’. I have two siblings in Texas and—”

A giggly shriek came from apartment 4B, cutting off the reply. Sheldon closed his door and marched across to see a crowd of costumed people gabbing and laughing while a girl in a sexy devil outfit continued to screech as she was over the shoulder of a race car driver.

“Hey Superman,” grinned a curly haired woman wearing a magician’s assistant costume complete with sequins and cape.

“I’m not Superman,” countered Sheldon as he scanned the room for a certain blonde. “I’m merely wearing his logo on my t-shirt.”

“Too bad. We could have peeked under each other’s capes,” she winked.

“I’m not wearing a cape. But I do have several in my apartment.”
“Oh really? And where’s that?”

“Across the hall—which is the reason why I can hear this infernal racket. Ah.” He spotted a familiar black kitty come out of the washroom and ventured over.

“Penny,” he began sternly.

“You came,” she said happily. Sheldon could smell the alcohol on her breath.

“Yes, well, I thought I’d remind you that the noise ordinance comes into effect in”—he checked his watch—“one hour and forty seven minutes.”

“Don’t worry Dr. C, we’ll be as quiet as mice,” she said with her finger at her lips.

“Obviously you’ve never slept in an infested house,” he replied with pursed lips.

“Just give me this night. I swear no more parties ’til next year.”

“You might not be here next year, making this whole point moot.”

“There you are,” cooed the magician’s assistant as she sashayed up to the physicist and his neighbor.

“Hey Carol,” said Penny.

“You know Superman?”

“For the second time I am not Superman. I’m merely wearing a t-shirt with his logo,” Sheldon said testily. “Obviously alcohol has suppressed your basic comprehension skills.”

“My neighbor, Dr. Cooper,” replied Penny. Immediately Carol’s eyebrows raised in interest.

“Well the good doctor was about to show me his cape collection at his place,” she purred as she took Sheldon’s arm. Immediately the physicist yanked out of her grip.

“First of all, it’s not a collection. They happen to be attached to specific costumes,” he sniffed. “Secondly, I most certainly did not invite you into my abode. And thirdly, you don’t have a purse or pouch so unless you happen to be carrying antibacterial cleanser in your brassiere your hands have to be positively vile from touching people willy-nilly.” He glared at Penny. “Midnight and then I call the superintendant.”

“What’s his problem?” asked Carol as the physicist stalked off.

“He’s okay. Just a little uptight,” soothed Penny. “Come on, let’s get a drink.”

“This couldn’t possibly get any worse,” mumbled Sheldon as he bypassed a group of people on the verge of drunkenness in order to get into the hall. Suddenly the elevator doors opened and a familiar and rather large man came out wearing a Hollywood caveman outfit. “I stand corrected.”

“Well, well, if it isn’t Braveheart,” Kurt growled with a smug grin. Sheldon noted the man flex his muscles.

“Actually, I’ve no opinion on Scottish Independence,” replied the physicist even as his brain calculated the distance to his apartment.

“What are you talking about?”
“You keep referring to me as William Wallace. I’m unclear as to—”

“Listen asshole,” snapped the bouncer as he stepped menacingly towards Sheldon. For his part the lanky man stepped back in order to keep the same distance. “First you took my tv—”

“It was Penny’s television.”

“You’re not listening. You took my tv and now you think you can just show up here?”

At this moment Carol came to the door. Both men were still as they stared at her and she immediately knew that something was wrong.

Sheldon’s relief quickly turned to dread as she darted away. He looked to Kurt and braced himself for the beating he knew was to come.

“Kurt!” came a familiar voice—a Godsend to the physicist if he believed in God—which sounded more than a little pissed.

“Hey babe,” Kurt replied with a wide grin.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Penny snapped.

“I heard there was a party and Carol invited me.”

The Nebraskan put her fists on her hips in annoyance. “Well this is my place and I sure as hell didn’t invite you.”

“I see you invited him,” Kurt said, indicating Sheldon with his eyes. For his part the physicist carefully inched his way towards his door.

“He’s my neighbor.”

“Yeah, with benefits I bet,” her ex-boyfriend chuckled.

“What?! That’s all you ever think about isn’t it?”

“Like you’re any different!”

“Get lost!”

With a last growl Kurt stormed down the stairs. Penny took a moment to catch her breath and keep from going after him. They’d had spectacular blowups before but they usually ended up with make up sex.

That was not how tonight was going to end.

She looked to Sheldon’s closed door as she heard what sounded like something being lodged against it.

“Crap,” she hissed and stormed back to her party. She’d have it out with Carol and apologize to Dr. C. later.

Right now she needed a drink.

XxX

Sheldon emerged from the washroom freshly showered and less tense. He padded his way into the
kitchen for a mug of hot milk. The party was still going strong but the music had been lowered so he figured he’d rest undisturbed with his noise-cancelling headphones which he’d purchased and used when he first moved in until he could get used to the unfamiliar nighttime sounds.

The physicist sighed as he noted his hand was still shaking as he poured the milk into his mug. Every instinct from childhood told him that Kurt was going to ‘put the hurt on’ as Evan Hillier the neighborhood bully would say before going to town with Sheldon.

He put the mug in the microwave and set it to heat.

Sheldon was scared as Kurt advanced on him but even more so he was angry. Here he was, a twenty five year old acclaimed physicist living fifteen hundred and ninety five miles away from the hell that was Galveston and yet he was still facing physical harm at the hands of a complete imbecile who made up for lack of brains with a plethora of muscles.

“All of this over a stupid television,” Sheldon muttered. His neighbor came to mind with her green eyes and grateful smile. *This is what I get for answering my do—*

There was a knock at the door.

Immediately Sheldon darted to his coffee table and picked up his lightsaber.

Again the knock.

“Dr. Cooper?” Pause. “It’s Penny. I just want to say that I’m so sorry for what happened.” Pause. “I didn’t know Kurt was going to show up and I’m sorry he bothered you.” Pause. “You’ve been nothing but kind to me and I’m such a horrible neighbor”—*Is she crying?* thought Sheldon —“and now it’s gonna be strange ‘cause you probably hate me and—”

Sheldon set his lightsaber beside the door and removed the lawn chair that he’d wedged under the handle. He opened his door to find a teary-eyed Penny.

“Hey,” she sniffled. She took in his blue plaid pajamas and matching housecoat. It looked like something her Grandpa would wear and yet it somehow suited the physicist.

With a frown at the noise of the party behind her he stepped back and gestured with his hand for her to enter.

“Stay on the mat,” he warned and she did as she moved out of the way so he could close the door.

“Are you okay?” she asked as she wiped her eyes with her fingers. “Did he hurt you?”

“I’m unscathed.” Sheldon pursed his lips. “Am I to expect further visits from your ex-boyfriend? Because I won’t tolerate being threatened.”

“No. I don’t think so. Kurt’s not a dummy.” Here Sheldon snorted. “Okay, not a complete dummy. He just thought it’d be like old times when we fought and then made up. But he never cheated on me ‘til now. Or at least as far as I know. Maybe he’s been doing it all along or at least as long as we’ve been in L.A.”

“Penny, it’s late and I’m not particularly interested in your relationship epiphany,” Sheldon interjected.

“Yeah, you’re right.” She gave him a drunken smile. “Why can’t I meet someone like you?”

Sheldon was puzzled. “I don’t understand. We’ve already met.”
Penny chuckled. “Yeah, I guess we have.” Here her tone dropped. “It’s just that no one’s ever said I had orchids in my hair and ruby lips.” She looked up with glistening eyes. “Why can’t I be someone’s Princess Panjelly?”

“Princess Panchali.”

“Whatever.”

“Well, first of all you don’t look anything like a princess from an Indian folktale,” began Sheldon. “Your hair isn’t ebony and flowing to your waist; your skin lacks the pallor of sun-ripened wheat; your frame size—”

“Yeah, I get it, I get it. I’m not princess material,” Penny said testily.

“I didn’t say that. Your shape and coloration are similar to many princesses such as Cinderella, Aurora and Rapunzel.”

“Oh.” Her smile widened. “That’s okay then.”

“Now that that’s settled I can go to bed.” Sheldon shook his head. “I really don’t know what your ex-boyfriend was saying about our relationship having benefits because you really haven’t given me much.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “I didn’t think you were into benefits.”

“A relationship, even as tenuous as ours, should be of benefit to both parties. If you insist on interrupting me with your parties and incessant knocking on my door the very least you can do is bring me to the comic book store every Wednesday.” He paused. “And the occasional game of putt-putt.”

“Yeah, can’t forget the putt-putt,” giggled the Nebraskan.

Before either could say anything Penny stepped forward and gave her neighbor a hug. Immediately Sheldon froze as he felt foreign hands on his person even as he smelled the less than aromatic combination of beer and hard liquor.

“’Night, Dr. C,” Penny said as she broke the one-sided hug and Sheldon opened his door.

“Good night, Penny.” He watched the waitress make her way across the hall to her own apartment before closing the door.

xTBBTx

Sheldon coughed himself awake. He turned on the bedside lamp and lay back in bed as a sudden wave of lightheadedness and nausea overcame him. Immediately thoughts of last night’s interactions with numerous individuals came to mind. *The magician’s assistant touched my arm.* He rolled over to grab his thermometer and took his temperature.

One hundred and two degrees.

“Oh Lord,” he whispered.

Slowly he got out of bed but before he could slip into his housecoat his stomach lurched and it was all he could do to make it to the toilet. Sheldon threw up twice and then spent several moments dry heaving before he got himself under control. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands thoroughly before gargling with mouthwash.
“Need to rehydrate,” he mumbled and opened the medicine cabinet for the bottle of Tylenol and his Vaporub. The physicist made his way to the kitchen and set his medical supplies on the counter so he could get himself a glass of water. He popped two Tylenol and took a drink.

“I’m cold,” he said miserably. He refilled his glass and took the medicine to his room. Once he’d rearranged his night table to accommodate the glass and bottles he took out a latex glove before settling into bed. Sheldon put on the glove and raised his pajama top before opening the bottle of Vaporub. He stuck his finger in only to groan as he realized that the jar was practically empty. Thanks to his strict adherence to hygiene it had been a long time since he was last sick. Unfortunately out of sight obviously meant out of mind as he’d forgotten that he’d used up the Vaporub.

“I take the bus all the time,” he growled. “How can being in a room with a few people possibly —”

*Penny hugged me.*

Sheldon pursed his lips.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Peddy.”

Knock Knock Knock “Peddy.”

*cough*cough*

Knock Knock Knock Knock “Peddy.”

Inside 4B Penny rolled over in bed and groaned. She hadn’t meant to get as drunk as she had but Kurt showing up really messed with her mojo. *To-tally didn’t see that in my horoscope.*

Another three knocks with a garbled ‘Penny’ chaser came her way. She knew that Sheldon wouldn’t stop until she answered so she got out of bed and dragged herself to the door. She took in her pale neighbor wearing a winter hat, mitts and comforter over his housecoat.

“Hallowe’en was yesterday,” she yawned. “‘Sup?”

“I’ll tell you what’s ‘sup’—last night’s dinner plus several ounces of gastric secretions,” Sheldon sniffled. He held out his mitt holding an empty jar. “I’m out of Vaporub.”

“I don’t have any.”

“I wasn’t asking if you did. I’d never use contaminated Vaporub.” Again he sniffled. “I need Vaporub.”

Penny sighed. “Can’t it wait ‘til later? I mean I’m totally messed right now.” She indicated her outfit. “I didn’t even get out of my costume.”

“Or washed off your makeup, yes I know.” Penny’s hands immediately went to her face as she turned away.

“Okay, I’ve got to go.”

“Yes you do—to the pharmacy.”
She pursed her lips. “And just what would you do without me?”

“Go on in good health.” He coughed twice.

“Exa—” She glared. “It’s my fault you’re sick?”

“You brought a gaggle of strangers to our floor, one of whom touched me with her pestilent paw. Not to mention you fondled my person.”

“I what?!” Her mouth dropped.

He sniffled. “You heard me. I was in my pajamas when you stepped into my space and put your hands—”

“Okay, okay I get the picture!” She swallowed hard as she looked at her obviously miserable neighbor. “Let me clean up and I’ll get your Vaporub.”

“Agreed.” Sheldon turned and shuffled his way back to his apartment.

Penny closed her door and rested her forehead against it. She counted to ten before letting out a groan.

“What the frak did I do?”

She made her way into her bedroom and stripped out of her cat costume before going into the bathroom. One look in the mirror and she brought out the jar of cold cream to get the makeup off. As she rubbed and scrubbed she wracked her brain but couldn’t remember anything about Sheldon after finding him in the hall with Kurt.

‘You fondled my person.’

She did remember the sneer on her ex-boyfriend’s face as she accused him of always thinking about sex.

‘Like you’re any different.’

Immediately she was inundated with memories of Sheldon at the comic book store and putt-putt course—even the Cheesecake Factory.

A windy day as she watched his beautiful kite dance in the sky.

Penny stared into the mirror with her creamy gray face from the cold cream mixing with the cat makeup.

“I’m never getting drunk again.”

XxX

Penny paid for her items and exited Walgreens. She’d gotten the Vaporub and decided to toss in a roll of Halls throat lozenges and two cans of chicken noodle soup. Her guilt over last night bubbled again to the surface. She had no idea how she was to act around the physicist when all she wanted to do was crawl into a hole and die. Still, he was sick and there was no way she was going to screw this up.

Her phone rang—unknown number—and answered:

“Hello?”
“Hey Penny! It’s Christie!”

“Wow. Christie. Um, how are you girl?”

“About ready to go out of my mind. You had it so right moving to L.A.”

“Ya. So, what’s up?”

“Well I ran into your brother last week—by the by a little birdie told me he’s found a new place to ‘do some cookin’ if ya know what I mean. Anyways, he made me think of you and I realized that I’m not happy here. Omaha sucks.”

“Nothing beats L.A.”

“Just what I was thinking. So anyways, I was wondering if you could put me up for a bit while I get myself set up?”

“You—you’re coming to L.A.?”

“You just figured you’d be cool to hang with since you could show me the place and whatnot. I mean we’re practically family.”

“You. Listen I’ve gotta go. Is this your number?”

“You bet. I’ll let you get back to your man.”

“My what? I’m in a Walgreen parking lot thank you very much.”

“Fresh out of condoms, huh? It’s cool, girl. I’ll talk to ya later.”

“Yeah.”

Penny hung up and shoved her phone in her purse.

“Why the hell does everyone think I’m a slut?” she seethed.

‘I was in my pajamas when you—’

“Oh. Yeah,” Penny sighed as she opened her car door.

XxX

“Dr. C?” Penny said as she knocked at his apartment.

She heard the sounds of shuffling feet and sniffing come closer until the lock turned and the door opened to reveal a gaunt and shivering Sheldon wrapped in his comforter.

“Oh sweetie, you don’t look good,” she said softly.

“My fever hasn’t broken,” Sheldon replied hoarsely. “I’m trying not to dehydrate but I’m unsure of my fluid intake-outtake ratio.”

“I’ve got your Vaporub and some Halls and some chicken soup.” Penny held out the bag and he took it; for an instant their fingers touched and she could feel their icy coldness. “Hey, if you want I can make the soup at my place and bring over a bowl.”
“Your place is teeming with germs,” he sniffled.

“Okay well I was just offer—”

“You’ll have to heat it here,” he said and with that moved away from the door to his lawn chair.

Penny stood stunned in the hall before getting a hold of herself and entered his apartment. She closed the door and sanitized her feet before padding over to the physicist.

“Okay let me get the soup and—”

“Wash your hands,” he said firmly. “The bathroom’s down the hall.”

“Sure thing.” She went to the washroom and was nearly bowled over by the smell of bleach as she opened the door. Taking a breath she entered and proceeded to wash up. *God this place is spotless.* Everything shone, from the floor tiles to the chrome of the faucets. Combined with the smell it reminded her of a hospital, more clinical than homey. In fact, as far as she saw clinical pretty much described his entire apartment.

“Okay Dr. C,” she said cheerily as she returned to the living room. “Just tell me where—” On the counter was a pot and lid, can opener, bowl and tablespoon. “Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

Penny got busy and in no time the soup was heating on the stove. She looked to her neighbor who sat shivering in his chair.

“Isn’t there somewhere more comfortable you could be?” she asked.

“My bed.”

“Why don’t you get into bed and I’ll bring you the soup?”

“Because no one can be in my room,” he said adamantly before coughing.

“No problem. We’ll stay out here.”

“Of course my room is already contaminated,” he said slowly. “I’ll have to sanitize it regardless if you enter.” He stood. “I’ll get a tray and leave my door open.”

“Sure thing.” She watched him shuffle off.

After a few minutes and an occasional stir the soup was ready and she poured some into the bowl before taking it to his room.

“Soup’s on,” she said brightly and stepped into what she could best describe as a pre-teen’s bedroom. While everything was neat as a pin Penny noted that Sheldon had Superman bed sheets and framed comic books on his walls. “Here ya go.” She set the soup on his tray as the physicist sat up in bed.

“What kind is it?” he asked.

“Chicken noodle.”

“With little stars in it?” he said hopefully.

“Uh, no.”

Sheldon wriggled his nose as he peered into the hot mix.
“You said you had to keep your fluids up,” Penny reminded him.

“Point.” He took his spoon and gracefully dipped it into the soup before bringing it to his lips. “This isn’t low sodium,” he said, making a slight face.

“Just work with me will ya? I’ll get you the right soup next time.”

“Should I survive this encounter,” he muttered. Penny rolled her eyes.

As Sheldon ate Penny looked around his room. There was an assortment of action figures and toys on his dresser and shelving unit which also held a whole whack of comic books.

“There’s your Green Lantern guy,” she said as she indicated the action figure on his shelf. “Who’s the dude in the red suit?”

“That ‘dude’ is the Flash,” he replied between mouthfuls.

“Ah. I guess he has something to do with electricity.” She caught Sheldon’s glare. “Well he’s got a lightning bolt on his chest.”

“The Flash possesses super-speed. He can move, think and react at light speed as well as having superhuman endurance that allows him to run incredible distances.” Sheldon paused to take a sip of soup. “He can vibrate so fast that he can pass through walls akin to quantum tunneling and travel through time.”

A smirk came to Penny’s face. “So how does he keep his clothes on?”

“He has an invisible aura around his body that prevents both his physical body and clothing from being affected by air friction as he moves at high speed.”

“How convenient.” Here she chuckled. “Then again comics are read by kids. Though it’d be funny calling him the Streaker.”

“I’m finished with my soup,” he said crisply and Penny took the tray albeit with a grin. “Rinse the bowl and leave the tray on the counter. I’ll sterilize it later.”

“Yes boss.” The waitress did as she was told and after washing up in the bathroom returned to see her neighbor.

“All’s done, kiddo,” she said. “So anyways how do you want to do the door? Should I leave it unlocked or will you get up?”

“My keys are in the drawer,” Sheldon replied as he settled himself in the covers. Penny retrieved them, noting the blue box-like keychain labeled ‘Police Box’.

“Okay, well—”

“You’re leaving me now?” he said a tad panicky.

“I’ve gotta tidy up my apartment from last night.”

“As you haven’t bothered to clean your apartment since I’ve known you, I can’t see why it’s now a priority.”

“I have cleaned my apartment, smartiboots,” snapped Penny. She thought for a moment. “Once,” she murmured with a tinge of a blush. “Besides, you’ll be sleeping so there’s no big deal.”
Sheldon reached across for his phone.

“Give me your number so I can text you to come over,” he said with a sniffle.

“626 756 1534.” Penny turned to go. “Have a good sleep and—”

“Can you rub the Vaporub on my chest?”

“You’re kidding.”

“It makes my hands smell funny,” he pouted.

“I don’t really—”

“Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease—”

Penny sighed and returned to the bed and sat.

“You’re a grown man who lives by himself. You can’t tell me you haven’t taken care of yourself when you’re sick,” she said with a crooked smile.

“Not this sick, no.” He paused. “Well except when I was fifteen in Germany. That didn’t end well as the housekeeper decided to treat my symptoms by giving me an enema.”

“Damn.”

Sheldon handed her the bottle of Vaporub before lifting up his pajama top and t-shirt. Penny stared at the pasty whiteness of his skin-and-bones chest complete with its tufts of brown hair. She raised an eyebrow and he returned her look with wide-eyed baby blues.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she murmured as she opened the bottle and scooped out some of the medicated cream. She touched his chest and began to rub.

“No, no, counter-clockwise or my chest hair mats,” he chided lightly.

“Sorry.” Her fingers made a circle on his chest. She couldn’t get over this as the guy who javexed his door actually wanted her to touch him. Immediately she flushed. *Yeah, I guess I already touched him so this is no big whoop.*

“Can you sing ‘Soft Kitty’?” he sniffled.

“What’s that?”

“A song my mom sang to me when I was sick.”

“I can’t say I know it, sweetie.”

“I’ll teach you.” He cleared his throat and sang hoarsely: “‘Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur; happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr purr purr.’” He stared at her earnestly. “Now you.”

“Are you sure you’re a world class physicist?” she asked, garnering a glare. With a slight incredulous shake of the head she began:

“Soft kitty, warm kitty…..” Penny stopped, trying to remember the rest.

“Little ball of fur. Keep rubbing.”
“Little ball of fur,” she chuckled. “Sorry.”

“Again.”

“Soft kitty warm kitty, little ball of fur….”

XxX

The landline phone was in the middle of ringing as Penny came out of the washroom after washing her hands.

“God, this stuff does smell funny,” she grimaced as she made for the door.

The answering machine clicked in:

“Hello Shelly, this is your mother. Still haven’t heard back from you and I somehow doubt the Good Lord has silenced you yap so you better call me back or—”

Penny paused before darting to the phone.

“Hello, Mrs. Cooper?”

“Yes. Who am I talkin’ tuh?”

“My name’s Penny. I’m Dr. Cooper’s neighbor.”

“Nice tuh meet yuh. Is muh son home?”

“Yeah, but he’s in bed.”

“Ah see.”

“Uh, I mean he’s sick. Sick in bed.”

“How sick is sick?”

“He’s got the flu.”

“Poor Shelly. He never liked bein’ alone when he was sick.”

“Still doesn’t.”

“Thank yuh for takin’ care of muh son. He can be a right handful.”

“Yeah I noticed. … Listen, I know it’s none of my business but I kinda gathered that Dr.— uh, Shelly, hasn’t been talking to you lately.”

“Quieter than a church mouse on a Sunday.”

“… A lot’s been happening and I think you should know. … Shelly lost his job at the university and….”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: William Wallace; Flash
“Alright sweetie I’ve got your soup in a bowl with saran wrap in the refrigerator,” said Penny as she was in the middle of tying her hair in a ponytail.

“You’re sure you have to go?” Sheldon sniffled from his lawn chair.

“I have to honor some of the cheques I write,” she chuckled as she picked up her purse.

“You can always claim ill dependent.”

She turned to him. “And how are you my dependent?”

“We’re neighbors. I’m dependent on you while I’m convalescing. I don’t see the problem,” he said with a slight frown.

“The problem is that neighbor-to-neighbor relationships don’t hold wind in the eyes of my employer.”

“That’s prejudiced.”

“They just don’t understand our love,” she said sweetly, garnering a glare. “See ya.”

Penny locked Sheldon’s door and proceeded into the elevator. All in all, yesterday ended up being more memorable than her party. Once Sheldon woke up from his nap she was inundated with text messages for food, damp wash cloths and, though he’d never admit it, company. He was beyond fussy at times but after setting him straight regarding her refusal to give him a sponge bath he settled down.

She exited the building, hopped into her car and drove to work. One bright side to doing the day shift at the restaurant was that traffic wasn’t as nuts as it was in the afternoon.

“Hey Pete,” Penny called out to one of the cooks as she entered the kitchen at the Cheesecake Factory.

“Hello gorgeous,” he grinned without looking up from the beef he was slicing.

After readying herself and clocking in Penny made for the kiosk to start her shift.

“Manager wants to see ya,” said Janet.

The Nebraskan went to the bar where Trevor was chatting with the bartender.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked cautiously.

“You bet,” replied Trevor. “Relax, you’re not in trouble.” He flashed a toothy grin. “Here’s the
deal: the new bartender isn’t working out so we need a backup.”

“O-kay, but I’m not a bartender.”

“We were hoping that you’d take the course.” Penny’s heart jumped. “It’s completely optional since you’d have to foot fifty percent of the bill.” Her heart sank. “But it allows you to bartend anywhere in California. As for now the bartending position comes with a two dollar an hour raise plus tips so the nights we need you should cover your expense—”

“I’ll do it,” Penny gushed.

“Awesome. Let me know if we need to change your schedule to fit in your classes.”

Penny was all smiles as she left to start her shift. Given her interest in trying new drinks she flirted with the idea of becoming a bartender but preferred to spend her hard earned money on acting classes. After all, she was here to be a star not a bartender.

She gathered her orders and was in the middle of entering them into the kiosk when an agitated Bernadette came to her.

“Penny, after you finish you’ve got a call at the bar. They said it’s an emergency,” the diminutive woman said worriedly.

Penny flew through her orders before dashing to the bar. *Dad have a farming accident? Greg blow himself up in a meth lab?*

Breathlessly she took the phone.

“Hello? …So? …I can’t do it here!”

She sighed before taking a look around to see if the coast was clear.

“Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur; happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr purr purr.”

With another sigh Penny hung up the phone and turned to see the bartender staring at her curiously.

“My brother’s kid. He’s really sick and, uh, wouldn’t settle down,” she explained before dashing back to work.

xTBBTx

Sheldon checked the time on his laptop. Penny would be home from work soon and he wanted a grilled cheese to go along with his soup. Granted his flu-like symptoms had abated; he no longer had a fever or nauseous feeling but he still felt a little lightheaded when he blew his nose and felt extremely cold from time to time.

He heard the door open and the sound of two women laughing. Immediately he frowned. The last thing he needed while his immune system was busy was an introduction of more foreign germs.

“I’m not sure where you’re gonna stay.” Penny’s voice.

“Don’t yuh worry. Ah’ve done my share of campin’ out when I was younger. ‘Specially durin’ tornado season.”

Sheldon’s mouth dropped and he quickly closed and set aside his laptop and popped out of bed. He came into the living room rubbing his eye.
“Mommy?” he said, both surprised and confused.

“Hello baby,” Mary cooed as she crossed over and gave him a hug. Sheldon stared at Penny over her shoulder.

‘You called my mother?’ he mouthed. Penny shrugged but to his mind didn’t seem to be apologetic in the least.

“Penny tells me yuh got yuhrself under the weather,” Mary went on. “How are yuh feelin’?”

“My head still feels funny,” Sheldon replied in a pouty voice. It took Penny a lot of fortitude to keep from giggling at the change from arrogant physicist to mommy’s sucky baby.

Mary put her hand on his forehead. “No fever. Have yuh eaten yet?” He shook his head. “Well then yuh get yurhself into bed an’ after ah get settled ah’ll make yuh a grilled cheese an’ chicken soup.”

“With little stars in it?” he sniffled.

“Always Shelly.” The physicist again stared at Penny, this time with a ‘See? With stars in it too!’ look. “Let’s get yuh tucked in.”

Both mother and son disappeared around the corner.

Penny shook her head and with a big grin left the Coopers to their own devices.

XxX

With two bags of groceries in hand Penny opened Sheldon’s door and entered the apartment.

“Hello darlin’,” Mary smiled as she was in the middle of chopping vegetables. “Successful trip?”

“Got everything you asked for, although it took me a bit to find the dry split peas. Not exactly something in my cupboard,” Penny replied as she set down the groceries and sprayed her feet.

“Ah see Shelly’s still adherin’ tuh his cleanliness regime,” the East Texan chuckled.

“Was he always like this?” Penny asked as she brought the groceries to the kitchen and proceeded to put away what required refrigeration.

“As soon as he was able tuh actively assert himself.” Mary chuckled. “Ah remember he took some stuff from the pantry tuh mix together an’ I thought he was imitatinn’ me cookin’. Turns out he made a cleanin’ agent from vinegar, bakin’ soda an’ lemon juice and went on tuh clean his bedroom an’ toys.”

“Wow. How old was he?”

“Three. He’d been watchin’ one of those science-y shows on the television.” Mary put the vegetables into a frying pan and set it on the stove to heat. “There’d be fights nearly everyday at four o’clock what with Shelly’s Proton show on an’ Missy tormentin’ her brother by wantin’ tuh watch anythin’ but.”

“Missy his younger sister?”

“His twin.” The Nebraskan’s jaw dropped.
Mary laughed. “Now don’t be worryin’. Missy an’ Shelly are like day an’ night. She’s right personable an’ compared to Shelly dumb as soup.”

“I have a feeling most of us are dumb as soup next to him.”

“Sit yuhrself down,” Mary said. “No point standin’ when yuh can be sittin’,” Penny pulled one of the lawn chairs over to sit closer to the kitchen while Mrs. Cooper stirred the rice in the pot of boiling water. “It’s like ah always say: Shelly has muh eyes an’ his daddy’s temper. All the science-y stuff comes from Jesus. Now yuh’ll be havin’ dinner here tonight. Ah’m sorry it’ll just be a mix of veggies an’ chicken with rice but the only thing ah recognized in the fridge in the line of sauce was the bottle of Chinese ketchup,” indicating the soy sauce with her eyes.

“Sounds terrific,” Penny replied. All she had on tap at her place was a cup of ramen noodles.

“Ah have tuh say it’s been thrillin’ tuh meet yuh, Penny. Shelly’s always had troubles makin’ friends. Lord knows ah’ve cleaned him up after many an ass whuppin’.”

“Poor guy.”

Mary smirked. “Now don’t be sympathizin’ too much. About ninety percent of them came about ‘cause he went around pointin’ out how smart he was and how dumb they were.”

“At least he’s grown out of that phase.” The two women laughed.

“Ah remember he built himself a so-called ‘sonic death ray’. Didn’t even slow down the neighbor kids though it did piss our dog off to no end.”

“No death rays here,” chuckled Penny. “Only ponchos and placemats.”

“When did he get the fish?”

“I think he was experimenting with them about three months ago.” Mary’s eyes widened. “He wasn’t torturing them or anything. He was just, I dunno, sciencing them.”

“Lord knows we don’t need another Snowball incident.”

“Snowball?”

“Missy’s guinea pig. Shelly got it in his head tuh build himself a cat scanner an’ used the poor creature as his first patient. The machine accidentally set it on fire and Shelly got himself sent tuh the hospital with radiation burns.”

“Crap on a cracker,” breathed Penny.

“It’s why when things are hopeless we always say that we’ve got a Snowball’s chance in a cat scanner,” Mary laughed as she got a paper towel and cleaned off the counter. “So where are yuh from?”

“Nebraska.”

“An’ what brought yuh here?”

“I’m an actress.”

“Ahh. Have ah seen yuh in anythin’?”
“Um, not yet. Someday though.”

Mary nodded her head knowingly. “Ah get where yuh’re from. It’s always nice tuh have a dream tuh follow.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Now yuh go wash up. Dinner’s gonna be in five.”

Penny moved the chair back to its position and went to the washroom. When she returned Mary was serving food onto plates.

“For yuh.”

“Smells terrific,” grinned the waitress as she took a fork from the drawer and sat down in the lawn chair.

Mary went to the refrigerator for a bottled water and handed it to Penny. “Wait ‘til Shelly’s better an’ ah’ll make us some chicken fried steak.”

“I’m vegetarian,” said Penny. “But I love steak.” Mary cracked a smile but said nothing.

The sounds of footsteps came down the hall until Sheldon disappeared into the washroom.

“Pee for Houston, pee for Austin, pee for the State my heart got lost in,” he said. With a grin Penny looked to the washroom door. “And shake twice for Texas.”

*Wow.* The Nebraskan took a sip of water and began to eat.

The washroom door opened and the physicist made his way to the living room only to stop dead as he gawked at his neighbor.

“What are you doing?” he gasped.

“What?” replied Penny with her mouth full.

“Shelly, mind yurh manners,” warned his mother.

“But she’s eating off my plate and putting my fork into her mouth! For all I know she has hepatitis!” Sheldon squawked.

“Hey!” growled Penny.

“Shelly enough!” snapped Mary. The room was silent. “First of all Penny is a guest in yuhr home. And how do we treat guests?”

“Like family,” Sheldon mumbled.

“And we do it with?”

“A smile.”

Mary frowned at her son and he turned to Penny and gave a smile so strained if it had buttons they would have flown off and hit the far wall.

“You moved my chair,” he Joker-grinned, his eyes boring into her head. For her part Penny
pushed the chair back an inch or so with her feet and stared at him innocently. With hands curled into fists at his side Sheldon stepped past her and settled into his own chair, still smiling but his glare murderous.

“This is terrific,” Penny said cheerily as she harpooned a piece of chicken.

“Thank yuh darlin’,” smiled Mary as she brought Sheldon his plate and fork. She returned for her own plate and pulled out Sheldon’s computer chair and moved it to join the others around the coffee table. She sat down and closed her eyes.

“Dear Lord,” she said sincerely. Immediately Penny froze her mouth in mid chew. “Mary Cooper here in the land of the heathen come to spend time with Shelly and his friend.”

“My neighbor,” amended Sheldon.

“Whatever. Anyways, we’d like to thank yuh right proper for what we’re about to receive. By Yurh hand we are all….”

“Fed,” Sheldon said dejectedly.

“Give us, Lord, our daily….”

“Bread.”

“Please know that we are truly….”

“Grateful.”

“For every cup an’ every….”

“Plateful.”

“Amen,” grinned Mary and began to eat.

Out of the corner of her eye Penny stared at Sheldon sympathetically as he sat still, head lowered (she knew it wasn’t because he was praying), before raising a forkful of stir fry to his mouth.

“So,” Mary said after a while. “Penny here tells me that yuh lost yuhr job.” Immediately Sheldon stopped chewing and scowled at his neighbor.

“You *told* her?” he said angrily.

“Shelly, ah am yuhr mother. Yuh should have told me yuhrself.” Mary set her fork down on her plate. “What did yuh say this time?”

Sheldon was indignant. “Only the truth.” Mary closed her eyes and shook her head. “Since you told me not to lie this is all your fault.”

“Don’t be sassin’ ‘cause ah have no problems puttin’ yuh over muh knee.” Both Coopers stared at each other defiantly.

“So, what’s the plan?” Penny said overenthusiastically with a forced smile.

“Shelly here’s goin’ tuh the university an’ apologizin’ to whomever he insulted,” Mary said fixedly.

“I’m doin’ no such thing,” Sheldon fired back with a bit of a twang. “I’m not returning to an
institution that would hire a third-rate researcher with all of the classifications of a high school science teacher to be my department head.”

“You didn’t tell him that did you?” gasped Penny.

“Well it’s not like he was hiding his résumé,” shrugged the physicist.

“Wow.”

“Now what did ah tell yuh? It’s okay tuh be smarter than everyone else but it’s not okay tuh rub peoples’ noses in it,” snapped Mary. “Now yuh’re gonna go an’ apologize tuh yurh boss.”

“No.”

“Ah’m sorry. Did ah say ‘if it please yuhr highness?’” Again Sheldon stared at his plate, his mouth trembling in anger.

“As a bright side, if you get your job back you can keep your apartment,” Penny added.

“Yuh’re havin’ money problems?” asked Mary. Her son gave a big sigh and turned to his neighbor.

“Is there anything else you think she should know?” he said crisply.

“Well he did get an offer by this guy Leonard to be his roommate,” Penny said slowly. “Leonard’s a scientist like him so I—”

“A scientist like me’?” Sheldon caught his mother’s scowl and clamped his mouth shut.

“Why that sounds nice,” Mary said.

“Your logic is flawed. If I get my job back I won’t need a roommate.”

“Yeah but you’re pretty much tapped out, Dr. C,” Penny pointed out. “If you room with Leonard it’ll give you a chance to get your savings back.”

“Not tuh mention it’d be good for yuh tuh have some company,” added Mary. Sheldon snorted.

“Yes, like I’ve already had a bounty of fortune having Penny in my life what with getting sick and almost beaten up and her calling you.” Both women glared at him. “I know little about Dr. Hofstadter save that he’s an experimental physicist who recognizes my genius, collects comic books and plays Halo.”

“He sounds like a match made in heaven,” Mary said.

“But what if his idiosyncrasies are too eccentric and extreme to be tolerated?”

Penny’s eyes widened in disbelief while Mary smiled lovingly at her son.

“Ah’m sure he’ll be fine, Shelly. But yuh’ve gotta remember that there’ll be two of yuh so yuh won’t be rulin’ the roost.” She ate the last of her stir fry. “Sides, it’ll give yuh an opportunity tuh learn how tuh compromise.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Please. Compromise is a stalling between two fools.”

“But a fool has his rent money an’ savin’s in his account,” countered Mary. “Now who’s up for a quick apple crumble?” She rose from the chair and proceeded to the kitchen.
Sheldon leaned towards Penny.

“You’ll excuse yourself and leave,” he hissed.

“Penny?” asked Mary as she put on the oven mitts.

“I’d love some,” she replied as she stared at Sheldon with a pumpkin grin on her face. “You gotta get used to people sometime, Dr. C,” she whispered.

For his part Sheldon got up and brought his plate to the counter and took the first piece of apple crumble and disappeared down the hall to his room. Immediately Penny felt like shit.

“Maybe I should go,” she said hesitantly.

“Nonesense.” Mary took the two plates of crumble and brought them to the coffee table. “Muh husband, God rest his soul, always said yuh gots tuh take yuhr time with Shelly.” She took Penny’s empty plate and brought it to the kitchen. “You ever hunt?”

“With my dad.”

“Think of Shelly as a baby deer. Yuh gots tuh approach him right or he’ll spook.”

Penny chuckled. “I guess I spooked him.”

“It’s alright,” Mary said amusedly. “Yuh got him goin’ in the right direction.”

Penny’s feet thumped on the sidewalk as she neared the end of her jog. Normally she didn’t run on Fridays but last night at her usual dance club had been a wash. The tunes were hopping and she did boogie a bit but since she cut herself off at three drinks she began to lose interest in the whole affair as her friends and friendly male-folk got steadily drunker. She excused herself and took a cab home.

As she stopped in front of her building the elevator doors opened and she saw Mary and Sheldon step out. Immediately Penny was intrigued since her neighbor wasn’t wearing a cartoony t-shirt but rather a conservative burgundy knitted collared shirt to go with his grey khakis and brown dress shoes.

“Hey!” Penny said cheerily as she entered the lobby. “Woo hoo, lookin’ good, Dr. C.” Instead of throwing the expected scowl Sheldon merely closed his eyes as if this were another part of a nightmare that wouldn’t end.

The Nebraskan didn’t like this.

“Good mornin’ Penny,” said Mary with a pleasant smile. “Yuh’re up early.”

“Yeah. I needed to get a run in before work.” Mary nodded. “So where are you two off to?”

“The university tuh see Shelly’s boss.”

“Dr. Gablehauser isn’t my ‘boss’. I don’t work there,” Sheldon amended.

“Now leave the quibblin’ tuh the quibblers,” his mother said dismissingly. Sheldon rolled his eyes but said nothing.
“Oh, okay. Well I hope things go well,” Penny said.

“They will. Jesus wanted Shelly tuh be a scientist so that’s that.”

“I hope that won’t be the argument you present to Dr. Gablehauser,” tsked Sheldon.

“Ah’m not sayin’ a word. This is yuhr mess tuh clean, Shelly. Ah’m just givin’ yuh the opportunity tuh make things right.” Sheldon opened his mouth to speak. “An’ we had the talk on what’s right an’ what’s right is yuh apologizin’ an’ askin’ for yuhr job back not lordin’ yuhrself over everyone’s head.”

“Break a leg, Dr. C,” Penny said encouragingly.

“I should be so fortunate,” he sighed as he held the door open for his mother to exit before following her out.

As Penny turned she heard Mary ask Sheldon why she called him ‘Dr. C’ but for the life of her couldn’t hear his response. She entered the elevator and pressed for her floor. She pulled out her keys from around her neck and when the doors opened she stepped into the hall. Since Sheldon had been sick he hadn’t been cleaning his outer door so the usual javex smell was only a fraction of its usual potency. Of course if things didn’t go well and Sheldon moved out she wouldn’t have to spend a fortune on vanilla candles.

She opened her apartment and entered but stopped short of closing her door as she took in the door of 4A. Sheldon had to be the weirdest person she’d ever met and yet when she thought about it she was glad they did meet.

Penny closed the door.

“Please get your job back,” she sighed before heading off to the shower.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

The Nebraskan jumped up from the couch and raced to the door.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Hey Dr. C!” she chimed as she opened her door to see her neighbor before her with some papers in hand.

For his part Sheldon seemed at a loss. Penny could read in his eyes that some sort of dilemma was occurring.

“What?” she asked hesitantly.

His hand moved casually to the doorframe and she could hear three little knocks.

“Penny,” he tried to whisper inconspicuously.

“Greeting over?” she asked. He gave a slight nod. “Good. So?! How’d it go?”

“First of all my mother wanted to know if you would…join us…for what she calls a ‘celebratory supper’ as—”

“You got it!” Penny squealed and wrapped her arms around Sheldon, pinning his own to his
Inside 4A Mary looked up from the kitchen counter to see her son standing stroke stiff in Penny’s embrace.

“Well, isn’t this interestin’,” the East Texan muttered to herself.

Out in the hall Sheldon gave a little sigh.

“While I appreciate your enthusiasm if you could refrain from mauling me—”

Immediately Penny broke the hug.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said quickly although with a big ass grin on her face. “So what happened?”

“I’m not sure. Mother and I arrived at Dr. Gablehauser’s office. I apologized for calling him an idiot; he gave me my job back and sent me to my office.” He cocked his head. “In other news mother told me they’re going out for dinner tomorrow evening.”

“Seriously?” the waitress gasped.

“Of course I’m serious.” He checked his watch. “As dinner won’t be for another forty five minutes I’ll expect you over in half an hour—plenty of time for you to fill out this questionnaire.”

“Oh, thanks.” Penny took the proffered papers. “What’s it for?”

“It occurred to me while watching you eat that I know nothing about your medical history. Now even was I to take your word that you don’t have hepatitis as a waitress your exposure to the public leaves you vulnerable to many communicable ailments.”

“Seriously?” she said, this time crisply.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Why do you find it necessary to confirm my statements? At any rate I’ll leave you to it as you’ll need to search your abode for your immunization records.” He smiled awkwardly and departed.

*Immunization records?* Penny began reading the first sheet as she closed her door.

xTBBTx

There was a knock at the door and Sheldon grabbed his clip board and got off his computer chair. He checked his watch. Leonard said that he’d be here at six pm and it was five fifty eight.

Sheldon’s nose wrinkled as he made a note on Leonard’s application.

Out in the hall Leonard noted the shadow of Sheldon’s feet under the door and wondered if he should knock again. He checked his watch—five fifty nine—and rolled his eyes. *Oh for the love of—*

“So where do you think Penny lives?” Howard asked.

“She said she was his neighbor so I’d guess across the hall,” Raj replied with a shrug.

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough with Agent Hofstadter infiltrating the Pasadena hoo-ha house,” chuckled the engineer, garnering a glare from Leonard.

The door opened and Sheldon appeared.
“Come in,” he said evenly. “But stay on the mat.” Leonard did as he was told but Sheldon held out his clipboard to stop the others.

“What?” said Raj.

“This was an appointment for Dr. Hofstadter. Your presence here is neither required nor desired.”

“They’re going to be here sometime, Dr. Cooper,” Leonard said gently. “At the very least they’re moving me in so it’s best they get a look at the layout.” Sheldon thought this through.

“Alright. Stay on the mat,” he warned again before stepping back to let the other enter.

“Do you want us to take off our shoes?” Leonard asked.

“Of course. This is my”—a twitch passed over Sheldon’s face as he recalled his mother’s words—“a home. Don’t forget to disinfect your feet,” indicating the can of Lysol on the shelf which Leonard took and began to use. “Am I to infer from this that your friends will be frequenting the apartment?”

“Oh, yeah,” the bespectacled man said as he handed Raj the spray before stepping off the mat. Sheldon shook his head once and made a note.

“Not a lot of furniture,” said Howard as he took the spray from Raj.

Leonard nodded. “That’s okay, I’ve got a chair and table I can bring over and—”

“I already have chairs and tables,” Sheldon countered.

“Dude, they’re lawn furnishings and cable spools,” snorted Raj.

“Unless you’re saying that you’re only renting Leonard his room which means a reduction in his portion of the rent,” Howard added. “I mean if he paid half he would be allowed to make additions to the common living areas and—”

“We can hammer that out later, Howard,” Leonard said soothingly as he took in the tremor to Sheldon’s jaw.

“No, Howard’s correct. As a full-fledged roommate you are entitled to contribute to the décor of common areas,” the East Texan said slowly. “We’ll talk about that later when we go over the Roommate Agreement. Now,” he tapped his clip board with his pen. “You had passed the three barriers to roommate-hood but from my notes I see there are some things to go over.”

“You kept my application?” Leonard said incredulously.

“Of course. It’s a document. You said that you needed time to think over taking the apartment.”

“But that was over two years ago!”

“You’re a stranger. How can I possibly know how long it takes you to think?” shrugged Sheldon.

Howard and Raj stared at each other. “So, let me once again show you your room.” The four of them went to the hall. “Your bowel movements are still regular?”

“Like clockwork,” Leonard said.

“Unless he’s had dairy,” added Howard.

“Shut it, Howard.”
Sheldon lowered his clip board.

“Dr. Hofstadter, lactose intolerance is nothing to be embarrassed of as over forty million Americans have the affliction,” he said.

“Thank you,” Leonard said appreciatively.

“Although you’ll have to sign an addendum promising never to knowingly imbibe dairy products within the apartment nor thirty minutes prior to arriving at the apartment,” the lanky man added as he stepped ahead to open the door to the spare room.

“‘There is nothing wrong with your television’,” Howard whispered to Raj. “‘Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We control the transmission.’”

The astrophysicist giggled. Sheldon turned to the man with a scowl. The smile vanished from Raj’s face and the group entered the room.

XxX

From their lawn chairs Leonard and Sheldon looked hopefully around the room but aside from themselves all they could see was an equally excited Howard and Raj.

As one the boys’ mood deflated.

“So much for inventing time travel,” sighed Leonard.

“Next is the ‘Skynet clause’ which obligates assisting a roommate should he require help to destroy an artificial intelligence he’s created and that’s taking over Earth,” said Sheldon as he pointed where Leonard was to initial. “Then there’s the ‘Matrix clause’ where if a roommate is made aware of the matrix and subsequently awoken it is his first priority to find the other roommate and similarly awaken him.” Leonard signed them both.

“Boy, you seem to have an obsession with malevolent technology,” chuckled Howard.

Sheldon sat back in his seat. “Of course not. As you can see I have a computer and game consoles. I also have a cellular phone, an IPod and my Tamagotchi from nineteen ninety eight is still alive and well. However I also believe that when the robots rise up ATMs will lead the charge.” Howard turned to Raj who had a grin on his face. “Now Section seventy four ‘C’: the various obligations and duties of the parties in the event one of them becomes a robot. One—”

A frantic knock interrupted him and before he was asked Howard crossed over to the door and opened it. Immediately Penny came inside.

“You mind if I hang out here for a bit?” she asked even as she slipped off her flip-flops and sprayed her feet.

“You mind if I hang out here for a bit?” she asked even as she slipped off her flip-flops and sprayed her feet.

“As you seem to be settling in regardless of my decision I might as well bestow a hearty, ‘hello neighbor. Why don’t you come in?’” twanged Sheldon.

“Hey Penny, what’s up?” asked Leonard as he turned to take in the Nebraskan’s perturbed demeanor.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Definitely not my luck. This girl from Omaha I know, Christie, is in my apartment yapping about all the guys she’s slept with and it’s only been a few hours so I don’t know how I’m going to put up with this for who knows how long before she finds a place of her
own.

“Just to clarify: she’s relating all of the men she’s slept with in total, not all the men she’s slept
with in the past few hours,” Howard said with an intensity Penny had never heard.

“She’s practically slept with the city of Omaha.”

“As fascinating as it is hearing the exploits of your companion Leonard and I have to get back to
the Roommate Agreement,” Sheldon said firmly.

“Yeah, just a sec,” Leonard said distractedly. “So why did you say she could come over if you
don’t like her?” he asked the waitress.

“I dunno. She was engaged to my cousin while sleeping with my brother so she’s kinda family I
suppose,” Penny shrugged. “Anyways, I’d really appreciate it if”—she turned to close the door
and stopped. “Where’s Howard?”

“Bon jour mademoiselle,” came the engineer’s voice from the hall. “I understand you’re new in
town.”

Leonard lowered his head as he used his hand to cover his eyes while Raj began whistling quietly
as he went to look out the living room window.

XxX

“Well anyways I suppose we should grab Howard and go,” Leonard said sheepishly as he stood
and stretched. The lawn chair was murder on his back and he vowed that the first thing he was
going to move into the apartment was his chair.

“Yes please,” said Penny as Raj and she finished reassembling the DNA model.

“I’ll look over the document tomorrow and give you a notarized copy at work on Monday.”
Sheldon stood and moved to the computer desk. “Show yourselves out. Goodbye.”

Leonard and Raj put on their shoes before opening the door. Emanating from across the hall were
the muffled sounds of a heavy backbeat and the vocals of Nelly Furtado and Timbaland.

“Crap on a cracker,” hissed Penny as she slipped on her flip-flops and marched across and into her
apartment.

“Night Dr. Cooper,” Leonard said as he left, followed by Raj who closed the door. The two
scientists crossed the hall only to encounter a wide-eyed Penny who gestured for them to stay out
even as she exited the apartment.

“I can’t believe this!” Penny growled.

“What?” asked Leonard.

“Your friend Howard is getting busy with Christie—on my bed!”

“To be fair I’ve only known Howard four years,” the experimental physicist began. Both Penny
and Raj gave him a ‘get real’ frown. “I suppose I can go get him,” he said unenthusiastically.

“No,” Penny sighed. “Christie’s my guest and I can’t just kick her out.”

“So what are you going to do?”
“I’ll figure something out. Anyways, I’ll let you guys go.”

“You can stay at my place,” Leonard blurted out. Penny looked at him questioningly. “I mean Howard is my friend and it’s sorta my fault since he came over with me so I feel obligated to make sure that you have a place to stay.”

“That’s so sweet,” Penny smiled warmly. “But I want to be close to my apartment.”

“Okay,” Leonard said as the elevator doors opened. “Well goodnight.”

“‘Night guys.”

Penny turned to her apartment and glared at her door.

“I do *not* wanna go in there.”

She returned to Sheldon’s door and knocked.

“Oh. It’s you,” the physicist said as he opened the door.

“Yup. Good ol’ me,” Penny said amiably. “Listen, I need a favor.”

“Now?” He checked his watch. “It’s nine thirty six. I go to bed at ten.”

“That’s okay. Actually I was gonna ask if it was okay for me to sleep at your place.”

“I’m sorry but the Roommate Agreement I signed with Leonard prohibits a non-relative female from staying over without twenty four hours notice.”

“Yeah, but Leonard hasn’t moved in yet.”

Sheldon thought for a moment. “Point. But I don’t have anywhere for you to stay.”

“It’s no big deal. I can sleep on the floor like your mom did,” Penny suggested.

“But I just had my sleeping bag dry cleaned,” he countered.

“Come on, Dr. C. I took care of you when you were sick.”

“I wouldn’t have been sick if you hadn’t exposed me to influenza therefore your claim of reciprocity is negated.”

“I’m not asking because you owe me. I’m asking as a friend.”

Sheldon was stunned.

“Oh,” he said. “Well that’s different then.”

“So I can stay?” she asked hopefully.

“I suppose so.” Sheldon left to go to the living room closet. Penny closed the apartment door and sprayed her feet. “You can sleep in front of the closet so you won’t be a trip hazard should an emergency evacuation occur.”

“Whatever ya want, boss,” Penny said as she took the sleeping bag from her neighbor and began to untie it.
“Aside from the front door there’s a window there”—he pointed—“and there with a ledge should the door prove inaccessible.” He crossed over to the hallway. “I’ll leave out a hand towel for you to use.”

“Thanks Dr. C. You’re awesome.” Penny slid into the sleeping bag and took off her jacket to use as a pillow. Sheldon turned to go but hesitated.

“If I may ask a question?”

“Shoot.”

“When did we become friends?”

Penny grinned as she looked at her neighbor.

“I dunno. You helped me with the tv and I took care of your mail and we went putt-putting and it just happened, y’know?”

“Oh.” Silence. “I’m not sure of the protocol here.”

“I’m sorry?”

“How do we proceed as friends?”

“Just keep doing what we’re doing.” A sly look came to her face. “Let me guess: you haven’t had a female friend before, huh?”

“I haven’t had a friend before, female or otherwise,” he said matter-of-factly. “Good night.” He clicked off the light and went to his room.

Penny rolled onto her back, the weight of his words weighing heavily on her heart and mind.

xTBBTx

It was the sunlight from the window that got to Penny first. Then as her awareness of the outer world attuned itself she heard the sounds of someone eating to her left. She opened her eyes and noted Sheldon sitting in his lawn chair.

“What time is it?” she yawned.

“Almost seven thirty,” he said distractedly. Penny snorted.

“Since when do you not know what time it is to the second?”

“Penny, please. My program’s almost over.”

“What ya watching?” she asked as she sat up.

“Doctor Who.”

She wiggled with the sleeping bag until she could see the television screen.

“Is the guy in the sneakers the Doc?” she asked.

“The Doctor and yes.”

“He’s kinda cute. Who’s the blonde girl?”
“His companion, Rose.”

“Ah. So what kind of doctor is he?”

“A doctor of everything.”

“No kidding. With all that time hitting the books it’s a wonder he has a girlfriend,” she shrugged.

“They’re not a couple,” Sheldon countered adamantly. “She’s a girl, she’s his friend, but she’s not his ‘girlfriend’.”

“Too bad. They look like a cute couple,” she replied as she stretched.

“The Doctor has evolved beyond having carnal relationships,” he sniffed. The credits began and so he turned off the television. “His desire is to explore the universe.”

“Is Rose his first friend?” she asked tentatively.

“The Doctor has had many companions in his travels,” Sheldon called over his shoulder as he rose to go rinse his cereal bowl.

Penny got out of her sleeping bag and stood to stretch yet again.

“Mind if I get something to drink?” she asked as she ventured to the kitchen.

“Would you like milk, orange juice or water?”

“OJ please.” Sheldon pursed his lips in disapproval as he went to the refrigerator.

“Where do you keep the glasses?”

“Second cupboard, left side. Use a juice glass.”

Penny opened the cupboard door. The glasses inside all seemed to be the same size and make.

“And just how am I supposed to know which is a ‘juice’ glass?”

“It’s labeled,” he said as he put the container of orange juice on the counter before retreating to the washroom to clean his hands.

“Where’s it labeled?” she asked as she took a glass.

“On the bottom,” he called. She turned the glass over and saw a label marked ‘water’.

“Oh.” She set it back and took another glass. “‘Milk’. Huh.” Third time was the charm as she found the elusive ‘Juice’ glass. She poured out some orange juice before returning it to the refrigerator. As she drank she looked over the various things stuck to the refrigerator door. “Cute flag,” she said as she noted the blue flag with a gold lion on it. “Where’s it from?”

“It’s the apartment flag.”

“You don’t say,” she said to herself amusedly. She took in a large chart filled with an assortment of numbers under the column headings of ‘size’, ‘color’ and ‘consistency’. “What’s with the chart? Mixing protein shakes or something?”

“Hardly,” Sheldon replied as he returned to the living room. “That’s my daily fecal chart.”
Penny physically recoiled from the refrigerator.

“You’re kidding,” she gasped.

“Why would I kid?”

“Ew.”

“Maintaining a healthy colon takes both vigilance and work. You can’t just poop willy-nilly and hope for the best,” he tsked.

‘Wow’ Penny mouthed.

“So, we have nineteen minutes before I have to evacuate my bowels. Would you like to exchange information regarding our idiosyncrasies? Participate in a physical activity such as yoga, aerobics or pilates? Text each other? Share in a whimsical tale?”

Penny chuckled. “Where did you get that from?”

“After considering our paradigm shift I consulted Google in order to learn how to be friends with a female.”

“Sweetie, you don’t need the internet to tell you that,” she grinned.

Sheldon was perplexed. “But I don’t know the protocol for maintaining a friendship. From what I gathered there are a myriad of expectations and procedures to follow.”

“Ya just wing it,” the waitress said as she rinsed out her glass and left it in the sink.

“That hardly seems logical.”

“Friendships aren’t about logic. You’re friends because you like that person.”

“But I don’t know if I like you,” he said seriously. Penny’s face fell. “But you seem sure we’re friends and since you have more experience with friendships I’ll defer to your judgment.”

“Good. Anyhoo, I better get home and kick out Goldilocks and company,” Penny said as she crossed over to the door and slid into her flip-flops. “Thanks so much for letting me stay, Dr. C.”

“Sheldon.” She turned to him with a look of surprise as he approached the door. “Apparently friends typically refer to each other by their given names.”

Penny absolutely beamed. “Thanks, Sheldon.”

“You’re welcome, Penny,” he replied before letting her out of the apartment.

xTBBTx

‘Compromise is a stalling between two fools’: Stephen Fry

‘There is nothing wrong with your television. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We control the transmission.’: Intro to the Outer Limits
The apartment door opened and Leonard entered carrying a box of his things. He set it down next to the other ones and closed the door before taking off his shoes and spraying his feet.

“Last one,” he said amiably to the empty room and took up a box to carry into his new bedroom. As he moved past Sheldon’s bedroom door he noted the comic books framed on his wall.

“Cool,” he said.

After dumping off his stuff he went back to the living room, only to stop by the bathroom door where he heard Sheldon clear his throat.

“Love your framed comics,” Leonard called through the door. There was no response and he shrugged and carried on. He put two more boxes away before the toilet flushed and, after a long pause, Sheldon emerged.

“Hey,” smiled Leonard.

“You talked to me through the bathroom door,” Sheldon said formally.

“Something tells me that was a no-no.”

“Never talk to me through the bathroom door.”

“Understood.” Leonard grabbed another box while Sheldon went to his room and closed the door before returning to the living room and his computer desk.

“So anyways, this takes care of my fragile models and whatnot,” Leonard said after moving the last box. “Raj and Howard will be at my apartment at eight am so we should be at your place ten-ish.” Sheldon snorted.

“Ten-ish. Hardly sounds organized.” Leonard rolled his eyes. “Nevertheless I shall have the drop cloths laid out.” Sheldon turned to his new roommate. “I need you to sign the common area furnishings agreement.” The bespectacled man came over and took the document.

“I have the right to allocate fifty percent of the cubic footage of the common areas only if you’re notified in advance by email.” Leonard shrugged. “Sounds fair.” He saw that the last floor plan for the living room was approved and that he could bring in his book shelves, coffee table, computer desk and chair and, after much negotiation which cost him the right to adjust the thermostat, his stuffed chair.

“Maybe we can get some stools for the counter,” he suggested.

“Why?”
“It’d give us a place to have breakfast.”

“But I already have a spot for breakfast.”

“Well I think it’d be nice.”

Sheldon shrugged. “What you want to do with your fifty percent is your concern.”

“I’ll email the request tonight,” Leonard said with a little smile.

“I’d like to remind you that in the Roommate Agreement Section ‘A’ under ‘Moving’ the mover is to ensure that the apartment returns to its previously clean state. Saturday mornings after Doctor Who is usually reserved for cleaning. As you’re moving in tomorrow the schedule will be revised on a one time only basis and cleaning shall commence on Sunday morning.”

“But I’ll still be unpacking,” Leonard protested.

“Dr. Hofstadter, I’m postponing train day,” Sheldon said evenly. “You can’t expect me to completely alter my schedule for your convenience.”

“Of course not—and I already told you, Leonard’s fine.”

“Very well, Leonard.”

“So is it okay if I call you Sheldon?” the shorter man said hesitantly.

“I work under the premise that only family and friends should call me by my given name.”

“Well roommates are kinda in between because we live communally, socialize frequently and we’ll know each other’s bathroom schedule intimately,” prodded Leonard gently.

There was a knock at the door.

Sheldon cocked his head. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he said to his roommate before opening the door. “Good evening, Penny.”

“You won’t believe it!” she gushed.

“There’s a lot I don’t believe in: religion, astrology, loop quantum gravity—”

“This girl who was playing Mimi in the Rent musical I tried out for dropped out so they’ve picked me to replace her!” squealed the waitress.

Sheldon thought back to Penny’s caterwauling in her apartment.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t believe you.”

“Well it’s true,” she pouted.

“Congratulations,” Leonard said amiably.

“Thank you, Leonard,” she smiled. “It’s only a one night review but there’ll be more than a few casting agents there so I’m so excited to show off my talent and hard work.”

“What talent are you talking about?” Sheldon asked.

“You know: singing, dancing, acting.”
“I see,” he said neutrally.

“So anyways, I know it’s short notice but the review’s tonight. Wanna come?”

“No thank you.”

Penny’s smile vanished. “Why not?”

“Tonight is vintage game night,” Sheldon explained.

“But this is important,” she whined. The East Texan sighed.

“Are you invoking a level one friendship request?”

Penny thought for a moment. “Is that the friendship thingie you slid under my door?”

“Friendship Agreement—and you’ve yet to sign and return it to me so your request is—”

“Be right back!” Penny raced to her door, unlocked it and darted inside. A moment later she returned with a stapled packet of papers. She placed the document against the door and signed and dated the last page. “Here ya go,” she said smugly and handed Sheldon the papers. “Anyhoo, I’m invoking whatever it takes to get you to come out.”

“When and where is it?” Sheldon asked.

“Eight o’clock at the Elgin Theater. I’m sorry I can’t drive you since I’ve gotta be there early.”

“I can drive him,” Leonard interjected. “Actually I can come too if you like.”

Sheldon blanched. “Oh, I’m not sure about that.”

“Come on Sheldon,” chuckled Penny. “I’m sure his car’s fine. Besides, the more the merrier!”

“I refute that statement. ‘More’ does not necessitate ‘merrier’. It only means more,” he amended.

In response the waitress stuck out her tongue before going to the elevator and pushing the button.

“I’ll see you *both* later,” she said with a smile as the doors opened and she stepped inside.

Sheldon closed his door.

“Why don’t you want me to go?” Leonard huffed.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want you to come,” Sheldon said slowly. “I’m just not sure if that’s a wise decision given that you’re not apprised of the facts.”

“And they are?”

“I’ve experienced Penny’s singing firsthand and I can tell you if cats could sing they still wouldn’t like it. As you stated earlier, as my roommate you are between family and friend and I wouldn’t subject either to Penny’s musical.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Leonard smirked.

“Leonard, if Penny’s been selected as a suitable replacement for the review I can only extrapolate that the rest of the show will leave a lot to be desired.”
“Well as her friend we have to support her.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “How are you her friend?”

“I’m her friend vis-à-vis you,” Leonard said with a satisfied smile.

“That would imply that I’m friends with Raj and Howard because they’re your friends,” Sheldon said slowly as he thought this through.

“That’s right.”

“Huh. I hadn’t realized procuring a roommate meant such social complexities. My last roommate wanted nothing to do with me.”

Leonard thought back two years to the crazed man in the landing and the ‘Die Sheldon Die’ painted on the spare room wall.

“Maybe I’m a complex guy,” he said jokingly.

“I suppose,” Sheldon mused. “Although your area of research would indicate otherwise.”

Leonard pursed his lips and marched to his bedroom while Sheldon returned to his computer.

XxX

When the lights came up in the theater there were three people left in the audience. Sheldon and Leonard sat stunned, too drained by what they’d witnessed, no endured, over the past two and a half hours.

“I’ll never watch another musical again,” murmured Leonard.

“Don’t blame the genre while we have obvious candidates like the producer and director of this fiasco,” Sheldon replied, equally as quiet.

From the side curtain emerged a familiar blonde figure and so the two men got out of their seats and made their way to the aisle.

“Kinda lost the crowd,” Penny said with a sheepish grin. “So what did you think?”

Sheldon shook his head. “Absolutely—”


“Really?” Penny said with a little smile. “I know things got a little weird when Scott tripped Janice during one of the dance routines.”

“A ‘little weird’?” Sheldon scoffed.

“It wasn’t as bad as you think,” Leonard continued. “Really, the rest of the performance was so astounding I know I completely overlooked the mishap.”

Penny nodded. “Well as long as you enjoyed yourselves. So how was I?” Sheldon made to speak.

“I know I was a little nervous ‘cause I’d been called in at the last minute and so hadn’t practiced as much but I think it went pretty well.”

“‘Pretty well’?” gawked Sheldon.
“Actually you blended well into the production as a whole,” Leonard said neutrally albeit with a nervous smile.

“Great,” Penny grinned. “Anyhoo, there’s a cast party so I’m off but thanks so much for coming. It really meant a lot to me.”

“Anytime,” said Leonard and the Nebraskan departed.

“‘Anytime’?” Sheldon asked. “I thought you said you’d never watch a musical again?”

“Next time I’ll be working at the lab,” Leonard replied as they climbed the stairs to the exit.

“How do you know if you’ll be at the lab? Penny hasn’t informed us of any future dates.”

Leonard looked sideways at his roommate. There was no doubt in his mind that Sheldon fell somewhere on the Autism spectrum.

“Because whenever Penny says she has a performance I’m going to say I’ve got to work at the lab. That doesn’t mean I have to go to the lab.”

Sheldon pondered this.

“So you’d lie,” he clarified.

“Exactly.”

The men walked through the lobby and out the front door.

“Query: why wouldn’t you be forthcoming and say you didn’t wish to endure another performance?” asked Sheldon.

“Because that would hurt Penny’s feelings.”

“Ah.” They walked in silence. “But Penny won’t know that her performance was substandard. How will she improve if no one tells her?”

“Sheldon, Penny is our friend and acting is her dream. We can’t just be all nasty and say that she was terrible—”

“We’re not being nasty. We’re only being truthful.”

“Well, sometimes the truth hurts and as we know from the X-Files some people can’t handle the truth,” Leonard explained. Sheldon nodded.

“Hence the reason why your answers to Penny’s queries were cryptic.”

“Exactly.”

“I see.” Sheldon waited for Leonard to pop the locks before entering the car. They put on their seatbelts and as Leonard inserted the key into the ignition Sheldon turned to face him.

“Leonard, my mother said not to lie.”

“Well, technically we didn’t lie. We just kinda obfuscated the truth.” Leonard started the car and drove out of the parking lot. “Believe me, it’s better this way.”
Sheldon looked out the side window as he puzzled out the night’s interactions.

xTBBTx

Penny was in the middle of enjoying her morning coffee when loud voices streamed into her apartment from across the hall.

“Sheldon, the bookcase is friggin’ heavy. We’re not going to line it up with a ruler!” Leonard’s voice.

“According to the common areas furnishing agreement the book cases are to be exactly three point four feet away from the door. Clearly you’re three feet two inches away,” replied the lanky man.

“What if we move in all the furniture first and then line them up with the floor plan?” came a melodious voice which Penny attributed to Raj.

“Guess he really is from India and not Indiana,” she chuckled.

She missed Sheldon’s answer to Raj’s idea but she sure heard the knock at her door. Penny crossed over and opened it to see an exasperated Leonard standing before her.

“We have a problem,” he growled. Penny raised an eyebrow and he tossed his head in the direction of 4A. The pair crossed over and observed Sheldon with a clip board and tape measure in hand directing Howard and Raj as they moved a book case against the wall. They stood back huffing and puffing as the theoretical physicist bent down and measured the distance from the door to the shelf.

“Better,” he said. “Although you’re still off by an inch.” Raj groaned.

“How about we use the remaining space to stuff Sheldon’s body?” hissed Howard with a grim smile. Sheldon tutted as he shook his head.

“While imprecise measurements might give you a pass at MIT I expect your engineering skills in this instance to be more proficient.”

“Sheldon, be nice,” Penny warned.

“I’m neither naughty nor nice. I’m merely stating an observation,” he countered.

“Which he’s been doing from the moment we got here,” snapped Leonard.

She turned to Sheldon. “Come on, let's go for a walk.”

“But it’s not Sunday or Anything Can Happen Thursday,” he said.

Penny came across and took the clip board from his hand.

“Yeah, but it’s kind of a special day because of the move-in.”

“What are we supposed to call this, Leonard’s Day?” snorted Sheldon.

“That’d be nice,” Leonard smirked, garnering him a scowl.

Penny grabbed Sheldon by the wrist and dragged him from the apartment, handing Leonard the clipboard in the process.

“Good luck guys,” she called. Sheldon tossed the tape measure to Howard.
“I’ll examine your work when I get back,” the physicist called over his shoulder.

Penny left Sheldon in her living room while she went to get a hoodie.

“I see you’ve let things deteriorate again,” he said as he glanced around the room. “You should at least pile your laundry together even if you won’t put it in a proper hamper.”

“Yeah but then I won’t be able to tell what’s sorta clean,” she replied as she came out of her bedroom zipping up her jacket.

“‘Sorta clean’?”

“Y’know, what passes the sniff test.”

Sheldon’s eyes widened. “You mean that you don’t change into clean clothes daily?”

Penny grabbed her keys and shoved her neighbor out of the apartment.

“Well it’s not like they’re *dirty* dirty.”

“Penny, Penny, Penny,” he tsked as she locked her door.

“Sheldon, Sheldon, Sheldon,” she replied sarcastically.

“You might mock me now but mark my words when—and believe me it’s most definitely a when—you get sick or endure a bed bug or lice infestation you’ll remember my warning.”

“That’s what I love about you: your bubbling optimism,” she winked as she opened the elevator doors so they could enter.

“I always considered myself a realist,” he shrugged.

“Sarcasm, Sheldon.”

“Oh.”

The doors closed.

“Missy once got head lice and for two weeks mother checked my hair twice daily. I could barely sleep as the thought of them crawling along my scalp gave me nightmares,” Sheldon commented.

“I remember this guy from grade school got it but he just shaved his head.”

“A draconian measure but effective.” They got out of the elevator and exited the building.

“Huh. Never thought you were vain,” Penny said.

“Why, because I refused to cut my hair? Why should I? It wasn’t I who brought the vermin into the house,” he said indignantly. “Besides, by your logic if I contracted a contagious rash on my arm I should have it amputated.”

Penny laughed. “Earth to Sheldon: hair isn’t the same as an arm. I mean from the length of your hair you obviously get it cut.”

“By a barber—and not just any barber. Good Lord I wouldn’t let any one have at me with scissors without having first studied my haircut records,” he tsked.
“Hair cut records?”

“My mom sent them from my old barber in Galveston to Mr. D’Onofrio here in Pasadena. It most definitely put my mind at ease.”

Penny turned her head to look across the street as a grin covered her face.

“Well that was nice of her,” she said neutrally.

“Indeed.”

“So, how are you doing with the move? You okay with everyone being in your apartment?”

“I’m not thrilled if that’s what you’re asking. However Howard, Raj and Leonard all swore they took showers before arriving and Leonard did agree to help me clean the apartment tomorrow.”

“Hope he likes the smell of javex,” chuckled the waitress.

“Actually, outside of the washroom I clean the rest of the apartment with lemon Lysol antibacterial wash.”

“I just cover things up with vanilla candles.”

“I must say, you Nebraskans are a hearty stock. Weaker constitutions would perish in your apartment,” Sheldon noted.

“Yeah, yeah, funny guy,” she chided lightly. “Thanks again for coming out last night.”

“As your friend I was obligated.” He caught her eyes narrow at him. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m really amazed at how we came together as a cast given that a couple of us were spur of the moment changes and whatnot. Could you tell which of us were stand-ins?”

“Most definitely not,” Sheldon replied adamantly.

“That’s cool. So what about me? How was I?”

Sheldon remembered his conversation with Leonard.

“Adequate given the overall level of the show in question,” he said with a twitchy mouth.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means”—a facial tic briefly closed his right eye—“It means that in the scheme of things you brought more to the”—another twitch—

“What’s with you?” Penny asked, her smile fading as she took in his strange facial expressions.

“Nothing,” he said excitedly, his cheeks turning red as his tics increased in intensity.

Penny grabbed his arm to stop and turned him to face her.

“Sheldon, if you’ve got something to say to me just say it,” she said firmly. He remained silent. “It sucked didn’t it?”

“Well it wasn’t good,” he admitted.
“How bad was it?” Penny asked quietly.

“The dancing was an undifferentiated morass,” he said evenly. “The set was hideous and yet it was somehow appropriate given that the whole production seemed to function on utter indifference. As for the singing, the cast had no business singing in the shower much less on a stage.”

“What about me?”

“You come across as very natural and aesthetically pleasing which is why it’s rather jolting when you sing. Your cadence is all over the place, you’re utterly tone-deaf and when you soloed your voice was an invasive presence more than a—”

“Okay I get it!”

They walked in silence until Sheldon heard her sniffling.

“Are you crying?” he asked awkwardly.

“Maybe.” Penny said with a stuffy nose.

“Why? How can you improve if you don’t know where you went wrong?”

“Last night you and Leonard said I was good.” She wiped below her eye with the side of her hand.

“Leonard implied you were good,” he amended.

“Well you didn’t correct him and you correct everybody,” Penny snapped.

Silence.

“Why didn’t you tell me this last night?”

“I’m your friend and apparently friends don’t ‘bring down friends’,” Sheldon replied.

Penny grunted. “You didn’t get that crap off the internet did you?”

“No. Leonard told me. He said to be vague if I couldn’t be ‘nice’ otherwise I’d hurt your feelings.” The Nebraskan stopped and gave a big sigh.

“Sheldon, being nice about it doesn’t mean bullshitting me.”

“Language Penny,” he frowned. “And I wasn’t lying to you per se.”

She poked him in the chest with a finger, making him wince.

“Don’t do this again,” she said firmly.

“Define ‘this’.”

“Don’t feed me what you think I want to hear. Tell me what you honestly think.” She paused. “Only try not to be so damn brutal about it.”

Sheldon nodded. “Alright.” Pause. “Although my intention was to be forthcoming not invective.”

“I know.” Silence before Penny snorted in amusement. “You know I was actually thinking of
trying out for another musical? Man, I would have looked like an idiot.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your appearance,” he countered.

“Why thank you Sheldon.”

“However, if you attempt another musical people will question your sanity,” he said drollly.

Penny chuckled and they walked on.

XxX

Sheldon stepped into the apartment with laundry basket in hand to find Leonard unpacking his books and putting them on the shelf. The lanky man paused as his roommate seemingly placed books here and there. He shook his head and tsked.

Leonard stopped what he was doing. “What?”

“There’s no organization.”

“Of course there is: physics on these two shelves, science fiction here, fantasy here, historical here and each section is alphabetical,” Leonard countered.

“So if there was an emergency and you needed to know how naïve expectations will fail in a quantum world you’d rush over to the physics section to scan its shelves in desperation as you tried to recall the author of the text. Ah yes, highly practical,” Sheldon sniffed.

“So how’s yours done?” scowled the shorter man.

“Dewey decimal system of course. For instance, it’s only logical to position geometry next to math followed by analytic geometry, metric differential geometry, Finsler geometry—” Leonard snorted.

“So every time you need something you waste time looking it up or did you actually assign call numbers to your books?”

“I don’t need to do either; I have an eidetic memory.”

“Huh. They say there’s no such thing as a true eidetic memory.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Obviously ‘they’ are wrong.”

Leonard leaned against his shelf with a smirk.

“Okay, tell me about the first time we met.”

Sheldon took a moment to think.

“Well the first time we interacted was on the phone on October twelfth two thousand and four. Me: Dr. Sheldon Cooper speaking. You: Uh, hi. My name’s Leonard Hofstadter and I’m calling about the room for rent? Me: You are aware of the minimal criteria? You: You mean the whistling part? Me: Are you asking me or telling me? You: Telling you. I promise I won’t do any whistling in the apartment. Me: Very well. Are you employed? You: I’m a scientist at Caltech. Me: Do you have a criminal record?”

“That’s incredible,” Leonard interjected.
“No, what’s incredible is that all of humanity can fit in a sugar cube,” said Sheldon before heading to his room.

Leonard looked at his books before continuing his task.

XxX

Leonard woke up and reached across for his glasses before groggily getting himself out of bed. He knew when he drank the rest of the ginger ale before bed that it was a mistake but he needed something to settle his stomach what with the move and dealing with Sheldon.

He opened the door and padded his way to the washroom only to stop in front of the door as a flash of light in the living room caught his eye. Stepping ever so quietly down the hall he observed a housecoated Sheldon wearing some kind of light on his forehead reorganizing Leonard’s book shelves.

With a shake of the head the experimental physicist went to use the washroom.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat on the corner of his desk as he pondered his whiteboard.

“The symmetry is still too restrictive,” he muttered. “Maybe a lattice cut-off?” He jotted down a new set of variables on the board.

Knock Knock “Dr. Cooper?” Leonard’s voice.

“Go away,” Sheldon said distractedly.

“You know Dr. Gablehauser said you had to make yourself available for a few minutes.”

“Well he didn’t say they had to be *these* minutes.”

“Come on. Dennis is already here and it’d be stupid having to come all the way back.”

Sheldon sighed and capped his marker. His concentration was broken and if he didn’t want to be disturbed further he might as well nip this in the butt.

“Enter,” he said.

The door opened and in came Leonard followed by a short, somewhat pudgy Korean teenager.

“Dennis, this is Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” said Leonard. “He’s a senior particle theorist.”

“It says that on his door,” Dennis sniffed. He cocked his head as he regarded Sheldon. “So you’re the one responsible for the dead end in string theory research going on around here?”

Sheldon blinked. “*Excuse* me, my research isn’t a dead end.” His eyes flashed angrily to Leonard. “Get him out of here.”

“Come on, Dennis,” Leonard said hurriedly. “Maybe we’ll go to the experimental—”

Dennis stepped further into the room. “Looks like you’re doing work in quantum loop corrections,” he said as he glanced at the whiteboard before snorting in amusement. “You see where you went wrong, don’t you?”

Sheldon glared at the young man. “I’m replacing space-time with a lattice cut-off. Since ‘a’
represents the smallest length in the theory the momenta are restricted to be less than $TT/a$ so that the ultraviolet divergences associated with large momenta in the loop integrals are avoided. In this continuum limit $a\to 0$ these divergences will again emerge.”

“Yes, but it’s obvious that this method is not Lorentz invariant.” Dennis caught Sheldon’s stunned expression. “You *have* considered a Lorentz invariant field theory approach, right?”

“You think I haven’t considered it?” sputtered the East Texan.

Dennis raised an eyebrow. “It doesn’t look like it. Or do you always cover your whiteboard with inaccurate equations?”

Sheldon turned to his board, breathing heavily through his nose to control himself even as his eyes scanned his equations.

“It might not be Lorentz invariant,” he growled. “But it does offer the possibility to investigate theories at larger values of the coupling constant because….” Sheldon frowned as he realized he’d still have to verify that Lorentz invariance will reemerge in the continuum limit.

The physicist set the marker on the ledge before again sitting on his desk corner. It wasn’t that he couldn’t get the answer. It was quite obvious, actually.

He’d just lost his Nobel Prize.

Dennis gave a smarmy smile before strolling out of the office.

XxX

Leonard glanced at Sheldon through the rear view mirror as they drove home. The lanky man hadn’t said a word since they’d met after work and Leonard wasn’t sure if he was unsettled or relieved.

“So anyways Dr. Gablehauser says the tour worked out since Dennis Kim’s seriously looking at staying at Caltech,” he began. Silence. “He’s interested in what Dave Underhill’s doing since the dark matter discovery.” More silence. “Anyways, I thought that maybe—”

“Leonard?” Sheldon said as he looked out the side window.

“Yes?” Sheldon turned to him.

“I believe I’ve finished with physics,” he said evenly. “The future lies in the Mexican desert.”

“What’s out there?”

“My Nobel Peace Prize.” Sheldon glanced at the side mirror. “I’m going to build a second Jerusalem.”

Leonard just smiled and nodded while very quietly pressing down on the accelerator.

XxX

Penny knocked softly before opening the door into a darkened apartment 4A. She spotted Sheldon sitting in his lawn chair staring at glowing green and blue goldfish in the bowl on the coffee table.

“Sheldon?” she said gently and closed the door. Silence save the sound of her spraying her feet.

She trotted over to Leonard’s chair and sat.
“Hey sweetie. Leonard came over and told me what happened.”

“What did he say?” Sheldon said without looking up.

“Well I didn’t completely understand what that Dennis kid said but I got the gist. He handed you your ass.”

“Language Penny,” he said half-heartedly.

Silence.

“What do you want me to do?” Penny asked.

“You grew up on a farm. What else do you do with a cow when she goes dry?”

She frowned. “I’m not going to shoot you if that’s what you’re saying. Come on, you can’t give up.”

“Can’t I?” Sheldon said bitterly. “In one fell swoop what I’ve been working on for years has been invalidated by a post-pubescent Asian wunderkind.”

“Sheldon—”

His eyes met hers.

“Please leave me alone,” he said quietly.

Penny got out of the chair and moved past him only to stop and give him a hug from behind.

“You’re mauling me again.”

“Can’t help it. It’s under booboos and ouchies in the Friendship thingie.”

“Ah. Section Four. So you’re engaging in physical contact for the purpose of rendering emotional aid to make me ‘feel better’.” Penny felt his shoulders slump. “Only I don’t feel better.”

“I know honey,” she cooed. “I just want you to know you’re not alone.”

He nodded and she gave him a last squeeze before letting go and leaving the room.

xTBBTx

“I still can’t get over how attractive Famke Janssen is as a redhead,” gushed Raj as both Howard and he sat at the lunch table with Leonard.

“But she’d be even prettier with her legs around my waist,” added Howard.

“Better hope she doesn’t reenact her role in GoldenEye.”

“Crushed to death by the legs of your lover,” mused the engineer. “There are worse ways to go.”

“Can we just drop the bedroom stuff?” snapped Leonard as his fork toyed with the mashed potatoes on his plate.

“What’s with you, dude?” asked Raj.

“Nothing.”
Just then Leslie Winkle and Dave Underhill entered the cafeteria, chatting oblivious to others around them as they rounded the corner towards the serving area.

“And so it becomes clear,” Howard said with an amused chuckle. He nudged Leonard with his elbow. “So how does it feel having the man who invalidated your work now violating your ex-girlfriend?”

“He’s not sleeping with Leslie,” snapped the experimental physicist. “And he didn’t invalidate my work.”

Raj snorted. “Are you kidding? His observation of high-energy positrons has provided the first conclusive evidence for the existence of galactic dark matter thus making your work completely useless.”

“Not *all* of it,” Leonard sighed.

“And he’s banging your ex,” added Howard.

“Yeah, thanks Howard.” Leonard raised a forkful of potatoes to his mouth before setting it down in a huff. “They could just be friends, y’know. I mean they signed up for the Physics Bowl. That’s something friends do.”

“Fair enough,” said Howard. “But when’s the last time Leslie’s had a male friend that she hasn’t slept with?” Leonard scowled into his plate. “Look at the bright side, you’ve been dumped for a higher class of physicist.”

“He’s not higher,” countered Leonard with a flush. “I mean, sure, he’s won the MacArthur genius grant and rides a Harley Davidson and is in a rock band but that doesn’t mean he’s better.”

“No, he’s perfect,” sighed Raj with a smile before turning to his salad after catching the wide-eyed expressions of his tablemates.

Howard munched on a forkful of corn. “I thought you’d moved past Leslie to your delusional relationship with Penny?”

“I have—and my relationship isn’t delusional,” Leonard said crisply.

“So you’ve asked Penny out?”

“I’m biding my time.”

“Alright,” chuckled Howard. “If I accept this madness as truth—which I don’t—then why the drama over Leslie?”

A grin came to Raj’s face. “Ah, I see. Leonard’s pride has been hurt. She dumped him for a more suitable mate and he’s angry.”

Leonard set down his fork with a clatter. “Darn right I’m angry.”

“And what you need is vengeance,” concluded the astrophysicist. Howard chuckled.

“What’s he gonna do? Dave Underhill’s tall, muscled and from what I hear is into some kind of martial arts.”

“No, no,” dismissed Raj. “Not physically. Up here.” He tapped his head. “And he’s got a perfect forum to do it, too: the Physics Bowl.”
“Yeah but Fishman, Chen, Chowdry and McNair always clean house,” said Leonard.

“Not this year,” grinned Howard. “They formed a barbershop quartet and got a gig playing at Knott’s Berry Farm.”

“Really?” Leonard perked up. “So then we’ve got a chance. I mean only Leslie’s played before and who knows who they’ve scraped together to form a team—”

“On it,” said Howard as he typed into his phone.

“We shall be like Shiva and destroy them,” Raj said excitedly.

“According to the website Leslie’s other teammates are this Barry Kripke guy and—” Howard paled. “Oh.”

“‘Oh’?” Said Leonard.

“Looks like Dave brought a friend. Dennis Kim.”

“So much for that idea,” sighed Raj. “Maybe you can have a cello contest or something.”

“No,” Leonard said firmly. “I’m a physicist and despite Dave having disproved my theories and my mother disapproving of my entire career I’m a damn good one. We are going to kick their asses.”

“But Dennis is a child prodigy,” Howard reminded him.

A smile came to Leonard’s face. “Then we need to get one of our own.” He indicated Sheldon with a thrust of his chin. All three men looked at each other before getting up with their trays and sauntering over to Sheldon’s table.

“Mind if we sit?” Leonard asked.

“You may,” Sheldon said listlessly.

Leonard noted that the food on his roommate’s plate looked as uneaten as his own. Things had been quiet in the car on the drive to work. He’d hoped that Penny’s talk with Sheldon would help the East Texan but obviously it hadn’t done the trick.

“So. I was wondering if you’ve got any plans on the nineteenth?” asked Leonard.

“Let’s see. The nineteenth is a Friday and Friday is vintage videogame night,” replied Sheldon.

“What if we can offer you another game?”

“Is it vintage?”

“No.”

“Is it a videogame?”

“No.”

“Then it hardly fills the criteria for vintage videogame night,” Sheldon sniffed.

Leonard sighed. “Look, we need a fourth person for our Physics Bowl team and—”
The East Texan snorted. “You want me to use my intelligence in a tawdry competition?”

“It’s for fun,” Raj said. “Besides, Dennis Kim’s playing.” At this Sheldon pursed his lips.

“Then I suppose the game’s in the bag,” he said crisply.

“Not necessarily,” said Leonard. “I mean we’ve played for three years running and we’re pretty good.”

“Dennis Kim will clobber ‘pretty good’.”

“That’s where you come in,” Howard said encouragingly.

“Hardly,” sighed Sheldon. “I’m a washed up theoretical physicist.”

“You’re not washed up,” countered Leonard adamantly. “Your idea for the supersolid was amazing. Our findings are being published.”

Sheldon frowned. “While fifteen year old Dennis Kim steps into my office and corrects my work.”

“Don’t take it so hard,” Howard said. “Dave Underhill completely invalidated Leonard’s career and yet you don’t hear him complaining. Much.”

“He didn’t invalidate—never mind,” said Leonard with a quick shake of the head. “Look Sheldon, you’re not a washout. I mean you were a wunderkind too. And you can’t tell me that your intellect hasn’t done anything but grow in the years since. So you got stuck on something. That doesn’t mean you wouldn’t have solved it.”

“But it was so obvious to him,” said Sheldon. “Why wasn’t it obvious to me?”

Leonard’s mind raced as he thought.

“Sheldon, why couldn’t the Doctor assemble pieces of the Key to Time?” he asked.

“Because it was too simple.”

“I bet your projects are so massive in scope it’s no wonder something slipped by.”

“And as we know a simple x-wing fighter can take out a Deathstar,” said Sheldon.

“But if we’re the underdog that means we’re the in the x-wing,” offered Raj.

“I’ve always aligned myself with Darth Vader.”

“And like Luke we’re going redeem you,” Leonard said firmly. “Luke had the Force. We have a Physics Bowl.”

“‘Do or do not’,’ Howard croaked in a Yoda voice.

Sheldon set down his fork and straightened in his chair.

“Gentlemen,” he said with a determined look. “We ‘do’.”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Dewey Decimal System
All of humanity can fit in a sugar cube: 10 Most Mind-Bending Physics Facts

Sheldon’s lattice research: staffscienceuunl: quantum corrections
The Lawn Chair Transmogrification


xTBBTx

The elevator doors opened and Sheldon exited carrying his kite. He pulled out his keys and unlocked the apartment door before taking a step in and stopping dead.

“What’s *that* doing here?!” he squawked as he stared at a burgundy leather sofa that was positioned where his lawn chair had been. His eyes flashed accusingly at his roommate who sat in the stuffed chair watching television. “Leonard, it’s in my spot! And surely it violates the space allotment agreement as it constitutes more than—”

“Actually it’s both of ours,” the shorter man corrected.

“How is it mine?”

“Well, it was Penny’s idea to get the couch so she paid—”

In a flash Sheldon was across the hall.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

“Yeeos?” Penny said as she opened the door to her fuming neighbor. She’d been expecting this kind of reaction from him but now to experience it first hand she had to admit she’d never seen Sheldon look so perturbed—or yummy.

“Where is my chair?” he seethed.

“The chair fairy came, waved her wand and poof! It’s a couch!” she said sweetly.

“You are in violation of the Friendship Agreement,” he growled. “Clearly you—”

“Where does it say I can’t buy a share in a couch on your behalf?”

“Because I didn’t authorize such a transaction.” He folded his arms across his chest. “You’ve not only obligated me financially to something I don’t want but also cost me in available footage.”

“It’s no biggie. You can pay me back when you can,” she said with a little smile.

“When I can— Penny, this isn’t about the money.”

“Sheldon, you have guests coming to the apartment and they need somewhere to sit,” she explained. “Raj and Howard are not going to stand around all night.”

The physicist narrowed his eyes.

“This has nothing to do with Leonard’s friends. This is about you not wanting to sleep on my floor. Well let me tell you, missy, the next time you’re hosting the whore of Omaha don’t look to
be a refugee in my home,” he said crisply. Penny rolled her eyes.

“You got me Sheldon,” she mock sighed. “As if I would think that your stupid lawn chair was crap for your back and butt and that getting a stupid used couch where everybody could sit would be a good idea.”

“Exactly. I—” His eyes widened. “*Used*?!” He dashed back to his apartment followed by Penny.

“Sheldon, it’s leather. Leonard and I sanitized it so it’s okay,” she soothed.

The lanky man took off his shoes and paused before stomping into the apartment proper.

“I guess there’s no point spraying my feet since you’re dragging any old thing into the apartment,” he snapped accusingly at Leonard.

“Sheldon, we need a couch,” his roommate said. “Besides it only cost a hundred dollars.”

“What a great deal!” Sheldon twanged. “I’m sure the Trojans thought the same thing about the Greek horse.”

“Have you even tried it?” Penny asked, irritated.

“‘Have I even tried it?’ Good Lord, it’s a used couch and—”

“Sheldon sit!” she snapped and like that the physicist’s butt was on the couch.

All eyes were on Sheldon as he wiggled his hinnie first one way and then another trying to get comfortable.

“Well?” Leonard asked.

“It’s not my spot,” his roommate pouted.

“Then get over there,” Penny said sternly.

She glared at her friend while Sheldon glared back as he moved to the other side of the couch. He sat and again adjusted himself for comfort. Tentatively he leaned back, surprised at the comfortable padding. He put a hand on the arm rest and offered up a genuine smile.

“It’s wonderful,” he cooed. Penny and Leonard chuckled. “Eternal dibs on this spot still applies!”

“That’s between you and your hinnie and your roomie,” Penny grinned as she turned to leave. “See ya later.”

“Penny wait,” Leonard blurted as he got out of his chair. “Let me, uh, walk you across the hall.” He cracked a smile. “It’ll give Sheldon some quality alone time with his new spot.”

“Regardless of what I’m sitting on it’s still my spot,” Sheldon said distractedly as his hand stroked the smooth surface of the arm rest. “It’s my 0,0,0,0 coordinate on the Cartesian map.” He closed his eyes and sighed contentedly.

“Told you it was a good idea,” Penny grinned as Leonard and she walked to her door.

“You’ve had a while to read Sheldon. I’m still in that adorable adjustment period where I feel like I’m living in an unswept minefield.”
“Well at least he keeps you on your toes. Anyhoo, I’ve gotta get ready for my shift.”

“That’s okay. I, uh, listen, I was wondering if you eat dinner.” He flushed at her stare. “I mean I know that you eat dinner I mean that I realize that you’re going out tonight but I was wondering if you had plans for dinner for the rest of this week or even next week I suppose.”

“Got another evening shift tomorrow but Thursday’s okay,” said Penny.

Leonard smiled. “Then I cordially invite you for dinner on Thursday. Six-thirty okay?”

“Sure,” Penny said amiably. “I like hanging out with you guys.”

His smile froze. “Us guys?”

“You know, you and Sheldon.” Penny chuckled as she gazed appreciatively at Leonard. “I’m so glad you moved in with him.”

“Yeah?” Leonard said hopefully.

“Leonard!” came a grouchy voice from 4A.

“Just a moment!” Leonard snapped. “You were saying?” he prompted Penny. Penny smiled encouragingly as she gave Leonard a play punch on the shoulder before closing her door. The physicist trudged back to the apartment rubbing his shoulder.

“What is it?” he asked brusquely as he closed the door.

“Someone changed the contrast of the television settings,” Sheldon snapped.

“Sorry I forgot.”

“Indeed,” muttered Sheldon as he adjusted the settings. “This is your second strike.”

“Second strike? Where did the first strike come from?” Leonard paused. “And what are these strikes to begin with?”

“First of all, you bought generic ketchup. Secondly, it falls under the friendship clause addendum. You said that as roommates you’re in the category of semi-friend therefore you have responsibilities. Obviously you haven’t studied the .pdf file I sent you of my likes and dislikes.” Sheldon turned the channel to the Syfy network and put on captions before muting it. “To that end a strike is given for each infraction until you proverbially ‘strike out’ at three.”

“And what happens then?” Leonard asked.

Sheldon made to speak but stopped short. “I’m not sure in this instance. Normally I banned Missy from my bedroom at home for one year. In this instance you’re contractually my roommate so I’ll have to devise something else. Perhaps a course of some kind.”

Leonard rolled his eyes as he made his way to the hallway. “Yeah, sounds terrific.”

“Additionally, I’d appreciate it if you’d consult me before arranging a meal with Penny.”

The shorter man stiffened and turned to his roommate. From what Howard had said Sheldon said in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t interested in Penny. *Did he change his mind?*

“Uh, what do you mean by that?” Leonard asked.
“I heard you,” replied Sheldon, obviously unaware of Leonard’s awkward tone. “You arranged dinner on Thursday at six thirty. You know I eat at six and in case I need to remind you since you seem to avoid reading your email Thursday is pizza night from Franconi’s. I’ll have to consult Penny regarding her topping preferences as we’re already getting two pizzas due to your lactose intolerance and I’m unsure if she likes sau—”

“Sheldon, we’re going out to eat.” Leonard cleared his throat. “And by that I mean Penny and me. You’re not coming.”

“But when Penny asked for clarification regarding the dinner companions you didn’t exclude me.” Sheldon was unsure of what was going on. “Is this like your comments to Penny regarding the musical? Because I have to tell you she wasn’t—”

Leonard sighed. “Sheldon, I asked Penny out on a date. Sort of.”

“I see. Granted, I’m thankfully no expert on dating but it seems to me it’s only classified as a date if both participants agree it is in fact a ‘date’.”

“Unless I want it to be a surprise.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Why would you want it to be a surprise?”

“Just in case she— Look, just work with me and don’t tell her what’s what.”

“You want me to keep a secret?” twanged Sheldon. “I’m constitutionally incapable. That’s why I was refused clearance for a very prestigious government research fellowship at a secret military supercollider located beneath a—” He blanched. “Well, that’s not important.”

“Sheldon, it’s no biggie. Just say that you’re, I dunno, having a colonoscopy that day or something,” offered Leonard.

“Well that won’t work.”

“And why not?”

“First of all, I’d have to take two days off work; one to drink the pico salax and clean out my colon with enemas and two, for the procedure itself. I’d have to skip Halo night and new comic book night and that’s unacceptable,” Sheldon said firmly.

“I doubt Penny knows the procedure intimately. And besides, you don’t have to use the colonoscopy idea. I was just using that as an example.” Leonard smiled encouragingly. “I know you’ll come up with something.”

“Leonard, I won’t lie to Penny.”

The experimental physicist leaned heavily against the hall wall.

“Sheldon, this is probably going to be my one shot at going out with Penny. I’m nervous as hell about doing this and while I want her to know it’s a date in that it’s an occasion to dine I don’t want her to know this is a date date in case she’s not interested in me because things would just be awkward between us and I don’t want it to be awkward every time we pass each other in the hall. Understand?”

“I’ve an I.Q. of one hundred and eighty seven. Believe me I understand. I don’t care, but I understand.”
“Good,” said a relieved Leonard.

“Leonard?”

“Yes?”

“As Penny’s friend I won’t tolerate you antagonizing her should things not progress the way you wish them.” Sheldon’s blue eyes were stern.

“Don’t worry. I’ll probably be under a rock.” Leonard went to his room.

Sheldon sat in thought before raising the remote and resuming the television’s sound.

xTBBTx

“Okay gentleman,” Howard gushed as he sat down with Raj and Leonard at the lunch table. “I’ve rigged up a test buzzer so we can practice for the Physics Bowl. Wanna give it a try tomorrow?”

“I can’t,” Leonard rushed in. “I’m busy.”

“Busy doing what?” asked Raj.

“I’ve got a date with Penny,” the experimental physicist said nonchalantly.

“Really?” gasped the astrophysicist.

Howard snorted. “Yes, but is she aware it’s a date?”

“Of course she is,” snapped Leonard before looking sheepish. “You know, in the sense that we’ve agreed to dine together.” Pause. “It’s best if neither of you tell her. You know, it’d spoil the surprise.”

“Oh you poor deluded bastard,” chuckled the engineer. “You’re pulling the ‘bait-and-switch’.”

“No I’m not,” Leonard said defensively.

“Trust me, I’m the king of this. So what did you use to get her out? A trip to the spa? Free meal? Perfume?”

“Nothing like that.” Leonard shrugged his shoulders. “I just said that Sheldon and I would be there.”

“And yet she’s coming anyways,” whistled Raj. “Wow.”

“It makes sense,” Leonard frowned. “They’re friends after all.”

“Actually that makes even less sense,” grinned Howard as Sheldon rounded the corner with his lunch tray.

“Sheldon!” Leonard called out as he waved his arm. His roommate walked to the table. “Come and sit with us.”

“You never asked me to sit with you before,” the lanky man said evenly.

“That’s because we weren’t a team before,” Leonard explained. “And teams stick together.”

“Alright—so long as I can sit in your spot.”
Leonard amiably got up and the pair settled into their chairs.

“So anyways Howard jury-rigged a buzzer system to use so we were thinking of getting together this weekend to practice,” he said.

“We can’t on Saturday. I’ve a dental appointment at one thirty that you’re driving me to so that shoots the day and later on it’s laundry night,” said Sheldon before taking a spoonful of clear broth.

“Sounds like you’re getting some major work done to your teeth,” said Raj before biting into his sandwich.

“Not really,” replied Sheldon. “I’m getting my teeth cleaned so they have to sedate me. I’m a biter.”

“Guess that makes it Sunday,” said Howard. “I mean it won’t kill us to skip paintball.”

“You play paintball?” asked Sheldon excitedly.


“No reason.” Sheldon looked intently at his spoon as it stirred his soup.

“Anyways, maybe we can ask Penny to read the questions,” Leonard suggested. “I’ll ask her when we’re—”

“What field do you play at?” Sheldon interjected.

“Uh, usually Ambush Paintball Park in Moorpark,” Raj answered.

“I see.” The East Texan resumed stirring his soup.

“I’ll download some questions and print them up,” continued Leonard. “There’s this site I found from Princeton that—”

“Do you play as a team or engage in solo play?” said Sheldon.

“As a team,” replied Leonard with a smirk. “Sheldon, would you like to play paintball sometime?”

“Sunday is train day,” his roommate replied before taking a sip of soup.

“So what are we going to call ourselves?” asked Raj.

“Why not the tried and true?” said Howard. “Perpetual Motion Squad unite!” Sheldon snorted. “You’ve got a better idea?”

“We’re engaging in combat. We need something fierce,” said the theoretical physicist.

“How about a Bengal tiger?” offered Raj.

“Actually, gram for gram the army ant has the greatest fighting strength.”

“Ants shmants, I’ve got a great idea for our uniforms!” Howard blurted excitedly. “We’ll use the Star Trek colors!”

Sheldon cocked his head. “That could work. I’ll be command gold while you three can be support red.” He didn’t see the communal frowns as he continued to eat his soup.
“Yeah but Spock wears science blue,” Leonard said slyly. “Wouldn’t you want to be blue, too?”

“But we’re in battle.”

“Yes—of the mind. And who’d you rather have in charge: Kirk or Spock?”

“You’re right,” Sheldon nodded.

All four men gave the Vulcun salute as they chanted “Dif-tor heh smusma.”

Penny took a sip of her vodka and cranberry in an attempt not to appear conspicuous as she glanced around the restaurant. She’d arrived to find Leonard waiting for her at the table but no Sheldon. After a couple of awkward jokes Leonard had quickly ordered drinks and the two of them engaged in a smattering of chit-chat that was most definitely drying up.

“I’m getting hungry,” Penny said. “Where did you say Sheldon was?”

“At home,” the physicist sputtered. “Um, he sent me a text before you came here saying he couldn’t make it. He had a colonoscopy and hasn’t bounced back.”

“Poor guy.” The waitress pulled out her phone. “My uncle had one of those. All he said was that it wasn’t fun and he’s tough as a bear so it must have hurt like heck,” she said as she texted Sheldon:

Colonoscopy—ouch! :( Sorry u cant make it. Hope u feel better soon! :) P

She put the phone in her purse. “Just dropped a line to Sheldon. So what brought that on?”

“The colonoscopy? Hard to tell.”

“Wonder if he noticed a change on his poop chart?”

“I’m sure it’s just routine,” Leonard soothed. He thought the colonoscopy would only be a comment in passing not a source of worry for his neighbor. “I mean in the next three weeks I have to take him to the dentist, chiropodist and optometrist.” Here he smiled. “In case you haven’t noticed he’s a bit of a hypochondriac.”

“I guess. Maybe it has to do with his being alone for so long. I met his mother and she said he never really fit in.”

“I can’t say I’m shocked. Sheldon’s a child prodigy. They’re often objects of curiosity and tend to be arrogant, condescending and frighteningly brilliant.”

“When I saw his fish I called it magic.” Penny smirked. “Apparently I’m easy to impress with the ‘softer sciences’.” She took a sip of her drink. “He said it’s nothing compared to particle physics. What is that?”

“It’s the branch of physics that deals with the properties, relationships and interactions of subatomic particles,” Leonard noted her blank look. “You know how they say everything’s made up of atoms?”

“You mean molecules?”

“Actually a molecule is big compared to an atom. Molecules are constructed of two or more
“Atoms.”

“And if it’s subatomic it’s smaller than an atom, right?”

“Correct, although some subatomic particles have greater mass than some atoms. Uh, not that it helps clear things up.” Penny and he chuckled.

“Okay, so why does Sheldon call himself a theoretical physicist?”

“That’s his job. Theoretical physics uses mathematical models to explain and predict natural phenomena. I believe Sheldon’s focus is on the early universe.”

“You mean how the universe was created?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.” She took another sip as she absorbed the information. “So what do you do?”

“As an experimental physicist I design and conduct experiments to examine natural phenomena that ultimately prove or disprove theories.” He cracked a smile. “Plus I get to work with lasers.”

“Cool.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Penny ran the tip of her finger along the edge of her glass. “So this Dennis kid, he’s a physicist like Sheldon?”

“Yeah. The university is pleased as punch to land him.”

“Is he really better than Sheldon?”

“Hard to tell,” shrugged Leonard. “I mean some prodigies flourish in their early years only to fizzle out later on. In Sheldon’s case he has a pretty steady output and his overall body of work is impressive.”

“So he’s just freaking out over nothing?”

“Sheldon’s got all the markings of a perfectionist. Everything in his life is controlled and precise.” He smirked. “I mean every item in our apartment has a label on it.”


“Only one Sheldon Cooper per universe.”

Her face became serious. “He told me that I’m his first friend. Like ever.”

“It’s really nice of you to care for him.”

“It’s just so much pressure. I mean what if I screw up and he locks himself away?” She smiled appreciatively. “Of course this time he’s got a roommate.”

“For better or for the Roommate Agreement,” sighed Leonard.

“God, I thought it was only me with the Friendship Agreement.” Penny suddenly gave the physicist a light swat on the arm. “That reminds me, if you give him any more stupid ideas about friendships I’ll clobber you.”
“What?”

“He told me about what you guys really thought of the musical.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not made of glass, Leonard.”

“Noted.”

“Good.” She gave him a wink. “Just try to be a little less brutal than Sheldon.”

“He probably didn’t think he was.”

“Yup. He’s really kinda awkward about things like this.”

“It’s typical.”

“Quirky genius thing, huh?”

“Actually I was thinking that he more than likely places on the autism spectrum. Probably Aspergers syndrome.”

“Oh,” blanched Penny. “I just thought….”

Silence.

“It’s a good thought,” Leonard pressed on, trying to lighten the mood. “I had a lot of problems at school. Between the advanced placement classes, cello lessons and being named ‘Le-nerd’ it’s hard to believe I didn’t have people lined around the block trying to be my friend.”

“Huh.” Penny shook her head. “I’ve always made lots of friends wherever I was.”

“It must be your natural charm,” grinned Leonard.

“That and I can hold my liquor and twerk like an electrified octopus,” she laughed.

“Twerk?”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Um, yes?”

“Try Youtube. It’s better seen than explained.” She snorted. “Or ask Howard. He’d probably know.”

“I’ll do that. Uh, check Youtube.”

They both began flipping through the menu.

“So how do you know about the autism stuff?” she asked nonchalantly.

“My mother’s a psychiatrist and neurobiologist.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. She was quite excited when I told her about Sheldon.”
“She wants to meet him?”

“She wants to scan his brain.”

Penny grinned. “Sounds like something he’d be into.”

“I haven’t told him yet but, yeah, I think he’ll be game,” agreed Leonard.

“Maybe you can send it to your mom for Christmas.”

“Actually we don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Ah. Religious reasons or don’t believe?”

“Aside from being a household of atheists my mother felt that perpetuating the delusion of Santa Claus was detrimental to my overall growth and wellbeing.”

Penny looked up from her menu in shock. “You’re kidding.”

Leonard gave a big ol’ grin. “Wait until I tell you her opinion of birthdays….”

XxX

The elevator doors opened and Penny and Leonard stepped out to their floor.

“I’ll just pop in and say hey to Sheldon,” she said as she followed the physicist to his apartment.

“Uh, sure.” He opened the door to find his roommate sitting on the couch watching television.

“Hi sweetie,” Penny said soothingly. “How are you feeling?”

“Uncomfortable but recovering,” Sheldon replied as he turned up the volume with the remote.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you guys later.” She gave Leonard a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You’re welcome,” he said dazedly as he closed the door. He hummed softly to himself as he took off his shoes and sprayed his feet.

Sheldon muted the television. “So how was your date?”

“Awesome!” gushed Leonard. “We talked and laughed and she’s just perfect.”

“She talks with her mouth full.”

“I never noticed.”

“I’m not surprised,” snorted Sheldon.

Leonard walked to the couch.

“So how was the colonoscopy?” he asked.

“No polyps,” said the East Texan as he gingerly adjusted himself on the fluffy pillow underneath his buttocks.

“You know you could’ve just lied,” said Leonard, garnering a scowl. “Still, no cancer for you and a first date under my belt. Things worked out great for everyone.” He went to his room.
“As long as you like having a camera up your rectum,” muttered Sheldon as he unmuted the television.

Penny walked down the university hallway looking for lecture hall ‘C’. She stepped into the room and immediately got a déjà vu feeling of the comic shop with conversations grinding to a halt as the male occupants took in her low-cut flowered halter tied sun dress and sandals. She smiled awkwardly until her eyes met the clear blue orbs of a positively scrumptious man standing next to a shorter woman with curly hair and glasses. She gravitated to him and he stepped away from his disgruntled companion.

“Hey,” Penny smiled.

“Hello there,” he replied with a friendly, but definitely interested, grin. “Dave Underhill.”

“Penny.” She glanced around the room. “Have you seen Dr. Sheldon Cooper?”

“You mean Dumbass?” scoffed Leslie as she came up to the pair. Penny pursed her lips as the two women exchanged smarmy smiles.

“You’re friends with him?” asked Dave as his eyes continued to devour Penny’s body.

“Yup.” The Nebraskan’s eyes flickered to Leslie and then back to Dave. “Friend?”

“Colleague,” he amended.

“With benefits,” Leslie added, much to Dave’s annoyance.

“Wew hewwo thewe,” came a whistle from behind, causing Penny to look around. “You know this wushious woman?” the brown-haired man said to Dave even as he stepped into her personal space. “Bawwy Kwipke.”

“Penny,” she said with a strained smile as she stepped back. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted her boys come through the door wearing their blue, gold and two red Star Trek uniform shirts stamped with ‘AA’ over the heart. They saw her and immediately Sheldon marched over followed by Leonard, Raj and Howard.

“I see you’ve met the enemy,” Sheldon said formally.

“You’re the other team?” Penny gasped to Dave.

“Hewe tew destwoy,” Kripke grinned.

“Hewe to what? Kiww a wabbit?” sing-songed a young man’s voice. Barry scowled as Dennis Kim came to the group. “Dr. Cooper,” he said with a slick smile. “Ready to be humiliated or are you planning on forfeiting?”

“Mr. Kim,” Sheldon replied crisply. “No, we’re not forfeiting. In fact I’d suggest you forfeit before you get the proverbial public pantsing.”

“You were warned,” Dennis sniffed before cutting through the group to go to his table. Kripke followed, albeit with a sour look on his face.

Leslie leaned over to Raj.
“I’ll be listening to every word you say with baited breath,” she grinned evilly. The astrophysicist swallowed nervously as she winked at him.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Dave said to Penny before Leslie and he departed.

“So you know Dave. Great,” Leonard sighed with a weak smile before turning away and pouting.

“You realize that fraternizing with the enemy is a court martial offence?” tsksd Sheldon. “Really Penny.”

“Sorry Sarge,” his neighbor saluted with a smirk.

“Commander. Spock was a commander.” Pause. “And Star Trek takes place on a ship. There are no sergeants in the naval structure. If anything I would be a petty officer.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Dr. Gablehauser said loudly. “If you can take your seats we’ll begin.”

“Kick their asses,” Penny said as she gave Sheldon a friendly punch on his arm. He nodded and the boys went to their table and sat. The waitress noted Dave staring at her and she smiled back before taking a seat in the front row.

“Alright,” Gablehauser grinned. “We now begin the preliminary round of the two thousand and six Physics Bowl pairing AA versus DM.”


“Dark Matters,” Dave corrected.

“At least I could find it,” Dave shot back. “What have you been doing over the past two years?” The bespectacled physicist looked away.

“If we’re ready to begin?” Gablehauser asked. Both teams readied themselves with the buzzers. “First question for ten points. What is the isospan singlet partner of the Pi Zero Meson?” *Buzz* “DM?”

“The Eta Meson,” said Dennis, who then smiled broadly at Sheldon.

“Correct. Next, for ten points, what is the lightest element on earth with no stable isotope?” *Buzz* “AA?”

“And of course the answer is Technetium,” Sheldon said crisply as he glared at his Korean nemesis.

“Excellent. Next question, for twenty points, how does a quantum computer factor large numbers?” *Buzz* “DM?”

“Show’s Awgowythm,” said Kripke.

“I’m sorry, that’s incorrect. AA?” *Buzz*

“Shor’s Algorithm,” said Howard.

“That’s right.”

“That’s what I said!” snapped Kripke. “I pwotest!”
“Noted,” Gablehauser said. He raised his eyebrows slightly and continued with the contest. “For twenty points, what is the force between two charged plates due to quantum vacuum fluctuations?” *Buzz* “DM?”

Dave was about to answer but stopped short as Penny took this time to cross her legs causing her dress to rise up over her knees.

“The Casimir Effect,” growled Leslie before elbowing her partner.

*Interesting.* Penny flashed a devastating smile at Dave. Leslie saw it and turned to catch the look of displeasure on Leonard’s face as he, too, noted where Penny’s attention lay. Beside him Howard smirked broadly at Leslie before wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. The optical physicist rolled her eyes and continued with the game.

XxX

“Please refer to the screen,” said Gablehauser. “Now for thirty points, choose the pair in which the physical quantities do not have identical dimension.” *Buzz* “AA?”

“Impulse and moment of force,” said Leonard with a scowl as he took in Penny giving Dave a sexy smirk.

“Correct. For twenty five points find the maximum velocity for the overturn of a car moving on a circular track of radius 100 m. The co-efficient of friction between the road and tire is 0.2.” *Buzz* “DM?”

“Fourteen meters per second,” said Dennis. “Childish question.”

“Considering you’re under the age of eighteen you’d be aware of that,” sniped Sheldon.

“Ooo, ouch,” snorted Leslie. Gablehauser cleared his throat.

“Twenty points. Lux is the SI unit of what?” *Buzz* “AA?”

“The SI unit of intensity of illumination,” said Sheldon. “An illuminance of 1.0 lux is produced by 1.0 lumen of light shining on an area of 1.0 m^2.”

“Correct,” said Gablehauser.

“Of course it is,” the lanky man replied.

XxX

Penny heaved her chest in an over-exaggerated sigh, noting that she had Dave, Howard and Leonard’s full attention. Raj was too busy pouting while Kripke sat with a very sour look on his face. Only two of his answers had been accepted even though he knew all his answers were correct. Leslie had managed to answer a few more questions but overall the game had turned into a grudge match between Sheldon and Dennis. The Nebraskan realized that her actions took the rest of her team out of commission but after watching how confidently and quickly Sheldon answered the questions she figured he could more than handle himself.

“Prevosts’s theory of exchange,” answered Sheldon.

“Correct,” said Gablehauser. “For twenty points, one thousand microns is equal to what?” *Buzz* “DM?”
“Ten to the negative three meters,” said Dennis.

“Correct. Now for thirty points, Sir C.V. Raman was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work connected with which of the following phenomenon of radiation?” *buzz* “AA?”

“Scattering,” replied Sheldon.

Gablehauser nodded. “Correct. Twenty points. What is the moment of inertia?” *Buzz* “DM?”

“Tensor,” said Dennis.

“Correct. Why are railway tracks banked on curves?” *Buzz* “AA?”

“So that the necessary centripetal force may be obtained from the horizontal component of the weight of the train,” explained Sheldon.

“I can’t believe we’re answering questions about stupid trains,” said Dennis with a shake of the head.

“Excuse me but trains aren’t ‘stupid’.” Here Sheldon used air quotes. “They are a dependable means of transport since their conception hundreds of years ago.”

“Hundreds of years’,” Dennis guffawed. “Is that what they call the eighteenth century nowadays?”

“For your information trains have been in use since the sixteenth century when crude railroads operated in the underground coal and iron ore mines of Europe. These systems consisted of two wooden rails that extended into the—”

“Blah, blah, blah,” chided Dennis. “Still a lame physics topic.”


“Gentlemen,” warned Gablehauser.

“Physics is intrinsically involved with trains. Trains deal with centripetal force and friction and the point at which a train leaving from Chicago towards Atlanta going twenty meters per second intersects with a train leaving from Atlanta going to Chicago at twenty five meters per second,” snapped Sheldon.

“I thought that was the subject of your latest paper?” Dennis laughed.

“Well, obviously you were misinformed. It was on incorporating gravity into mirror symmetry.”

“Wasn’t that filed in the library under fiction? Look, I’m glad you’re filling in the little details in particle physics but stay out of the big league stuff before you embarrass yourself.”

“*Embarrass* myself?!” Sheldon roared as he stood.

Dennis also got out of his seat. “You didn’t even know to use a Lorentz invariant.”

“I was busy determining how three-dimensional string-nets provided a unified picture of fermions and gauge bosons.”

“Not bad. All you’ve got left is identical particles, chiral fermions and gravity and you might actually have a theory worth reading.”
“Which I’m doing as we speak.”

“No, I believe you’re losing a Physics Bowl as we speak,” Dennis said with a smarmy smile.

“Then it seems only one of us can multitask,” sniffed Sheldon. “While answering my questions with one hundred percent accuracy I’ve also marked out local bosonic models with the property that when strings end or change string type in empty space, the system incurs a finite energy penalty.”

“Nonsense,” scoffed the Korean wunderkind. “Each local bosonic degree of freedom fluctuates independently and the physics is better described by individual spins than extended objects. It’s basic physics—or is even that giving you trouble?”

Sheldon’s hands curled into tight fists. “No, energetic constraints force the local bosonic degrees of freedom on the lattice sites to organize into effective extended objects. The low energy physics is then described by the fluctuations of these effective string nets. Such fluctuations can capture minute amounts of information like that streaming from…a…black hole….”

The room was silent.

The East Texan darted from the room.

“Don’t go after him,” Leonard said to Penny as she made to get up.

“He’s just resolved the black hole information paradox,” said an awestruck Raj before realizing where he was and clamped a hand over his mouth.

Gablehauser cleared his throat. “It seems as though you’re down a man,” he said to Leonard. “Therefore the winner by disqualification is DM.”

There was one or two claps from the crowd but for the most part people were still chattering about what had just occurred. The rest of the players got up from their chairs and mingled. Leonard was disappointed that Penny was talking with Dave.

“Looks like both your ex-girlfriend and imaginary girlfriend are going to hook up tonight,” said Raj as he pointed his chin at Howard and Leslie.

“Shut up, Raj.” scowled Leonard as Dennis Kim walked by seemingly in a daze. “Good game, Dennis.”

“Hardly,” Dennis replied. “It was a juvenile night with stupid questions and stupid answers from a stupid theoretical physicist.”

Raj gave a kick-ass grin. “Who just resolved the black hole information paradox.”

“Which goes to prove that anyone can get lucky.” The teenager stalked off; Raj noted that he took in Penny’s long legs as he passed by and out the door.

“What an arrogant jackass,” said Leonard. He shook his head. “And now we get to put up with him for the foreseeable future.”

“Not necessarily,” Raj said slowly. Leonard turned to his friend. “How many people at the university do you think have daughters around fifteen years old?” the astrophysicist said with a twinkle in his eyes.

XxX
“Are you sure it’s okay leaving him there?” Penny asked as Leonard drove them home.

“Sheldon won’t go until he gets things worked out,” he replied. “It’s okay. We sometimes sleep in our office.” He paused so as to appear casual. “So you and Dave Underhill, huh?”

“Well he is kinda cute—for a married guy.”

“Married?”

“Yeah, Leslie came over and wanted to send her regards to his wife.” Leonard smiled.

“Well that was nice of her.”

“Yeah,” grinned Penny knowingly. “Besides, I’d have to cancel my date with Mike.”

Leonard’s stomach sank. “Mike?”

“Some guy I met at the beach,” said Penny as she curled a lock of hair with her finger. “You know the usual type: tall, muscled, good looking with money.”

“Yeah.” Pause. “That gets kinda old don’t you think?” the physicist smirked.

Penny chuckled.

xTBBTx

**There's a lot going on atm so my next post won't be for a while. I'm sorry for the delay and will try to get back to this story as soon as possible. Thanks for reading and for your patience. *Lynn

Author’s Note: The last section where Sheldon notes the string-net condensate’s ability to capture information from black holes is complete bunk on my part.

Wikipedia: Particle Physics; Theoretical Physicist

Indiabixcom: Physics questions

Answerscom: How long have trains been around?

Yahooanswers: Two trains intersect

Daomitedu: A unification of light and electrons through string-net condensation in spin models
Penny groaned as soon as she spotted her coffee maker. Things had been so hectic this week she’d forgotten to get coffee at the store.

“Maybe Leonard?” she said hopefully and grabbed her mug before heading across the hall. She knocked and a moment later the door opened.

“Hi,” said Leonard as he took in her Hello Kitty shorts and pink tank top.

“Hello yourself G.I. Joe,” she grinned back. Leonard blushed as he adjusted the collar of his camouflage suit. “Listen, I hate to bother you but I’m out of coffee.”

“Oh. Well I’ve had mine but I can make you some.”

“No I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Penny either come in or stay out,” tsked Sheldon as he came down the hallway wearing his train engineer outfit. “There’s no point adjusting the thermostat if you keep the door open.”

“I hear and obey,” she said as she stepped in and closed the door.

Sheldon noted Leonard cross over to the kitchen and begin filling the coffee pot with water.

“What are you doing?” the lanky man asked.

“I thought you were due to meet at Raj’s place at eight thirty?”

“I’m just making coffee for Penny,” Leonard replied.

“But that would imply she’d be drinking it here. Who’s going to host her if you’re gone?”

“Sheldon, I’ll just fill my cup and go. Although maybe it’d be easier if you just gave me some coffee and I’ll make it at home,” she added to Leonard.

“That could work,” the experimental physicist said. He took out a container and proceeded to pour in the coffee.

“So where are you going all dressed up? No offence but you don’t exactly seem to be a hunting kinda guy,” smirked Penny.


“What’s that?”

“People,” said Sheldon. Penny’s jaw dropped. “Leonard, Raj and Howard are off to play paintball.”

“Oh,” she said, relieved. “Hey, why aren’t you going?”
“It’s train time.”

“Yeah but paintball sounds like something up your ally. I mean isn’t Halo a shoot ’em up kinda game?”

“With advanced weaponry, yes,” sniffed Sheldon. “Paintballing employs paintball markers and non-toxic, biodegradable, water soluble polymer projectiles.”

“Yeah, I get ya,” the waitress replied. “In Nebraska if we point and shoot at something it stays down. Well unless we’re just trying to frighten it away from our boyfriend.”

“You shoot?” asked Leonard as he came across the room to hand her the container of coffee.

“Yup. My dad used to take me partridge and duck hunting.”

“Why don’t you come play with us? We could always use another player.”

“Gee, I dunno,” she said diplomatically. “I mean I have to work today and—”

“Not until four o’clock,” Sheldon interjected as he lovingly hooked his G-Tel engine to the rest of the train already set out on the track.

“Thanks for reminding me, Sheldon,” she said sarcastically.

“You’re welcome.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to go,” Leonard said quickly. “I mean it isn’t like real shooting.”

“I disagree,” countered his roommate. “Paintball technology is used by military forces, law enforcement, paramilitary and security organizations to supplement military training as well as playing a role in riot response, and non-lethal suppression of dangerous suspects.”

Penny nodded. “Sounds like you know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course I do. I’ve a fundamental understanding of the universe.”

“Too bad you’re too afraid to play in it,” she said innocently.

Sheldon looked up. “I’m not ‘too afraid’ to play paintball. If Leonard were to prepare a presentation for our weekly roommate meeting I could schedule it into my routine.”

“Still sounds like a copout. I think you can’t shoot.”

“Penny,” he said as he stood. “I can teach you how to shoot close enough to a raccoon that it craps itself.”

“Prove it.” Green eyes locked with blue.

“He doesn’t have to this time,” Leonard interjected. “I mean it’s not like he has any camo clothes or—”

“Of course I have camouflage gear,” Sheldon replied crisply without dropping his gaze. “How can one be prepared for an apocalyptic scenario without it?”

“Great,” smiled Penny. “Well then you both have a—”

“You’ve got gear too,” he added as he crossed over to the hallway.
“What are you talking about, sweetie?” she said, her smile now frozen.

“Penny, I wish you’d spend more time reading the Friendship Agreement,” Sheldon said derisively. “I specifically wrote the language at a junior high level for your convenience.”

Penny gave a wide-mouthed exaggerated smile. “Your point, Sheldon?”

“My ‘point’ is that under the Agreement it is the duty of each friend to ensure the survival of the other in case of emergencies. In this case I purchased camouflage accessories so that you could conceal yourself should we have to raid a convoy for food or else have to protect the apartment from marauders,” he said as he went down the hall to his bedroom. “I’ll bring you your uniform.”

Penny was speechless as she turned to Leonard who simply shrugged.

XxX

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

The door to the wooden shack burst open and five camouflaged bodies entered, the last person shutting the door behind them.

“Well that didn’t work,” Leonard gasped as he did his best to catch his breath.

“Geez, ya think?” huffed Howard.

Sheldon raised his goggles onto the top of his helmet.

“I thought you said you played this every two weeks?” he said between breaths.

“We do,” snapped Leonard.

“Well then you’d think you’d have a better plan than ‘pray n spray’.”

“It’s a war out there, Sheldon!”

“It’s a bar mitzvah party,” Penny amended. Raj did his best to suppress a giggle. She shook her head. “Man, with all the camo gear and you owning your own guns I thought you guys would be like killing machines out here.”

“We play more of the Highlander school where we get whittled down to one and then beheaded,” chuckled Howard. “Sometimes we can get in two games under our belt before we go to Dennys.”

“Unacceptable,” tsked Sheldon. “When I was asked to play I’d assumed it would be under competent leadership. Obviously I was wrong.”

“Hey!” growled Leonard. Raj whispered in Howard’s ear.

“Sheldon’s right,” the engineer interpreted. “I mean when’s the last time we actually beat someone from the university?” Again Raj whispered. “Okay, when did we ever win, period?”

“That is about to change.” Sheldon knelt and began outlining a crude map with his finger in the dirt.

“Who died and made you leader?” asked Leonard.

Sheldon stood to regard his roommate. “Pursuant to Starfleet General Order 104 Section A, you
are deemed unfit and I hereby relieve you of your command.” He returned to his map.

“I can’t believe you’re siding with him,” the experimental physicist spat as Penny, Howard and Raj huddled in and around Sheldon to see what he was doing. “I mean he’s never played before.”

“I’ve played a vast array of first-person shoot ‘em ups, Leonard. The tactics aren’t that different: utilize the terrain to our advantage, study the enemy for weaknesses, create opportunities. In this case, since Lawrence Finkelstein and his cohorts seem to be focused on retaining their flag I suggest a diversion. Howard and Leonard go here and here and start firing while Penny and I will be here and here potting off the enemy as they scatter in the other direction. That should leave Raj free to capture the flag.”

Leonard took a moment to digest the information.

“That could work,” he said at last. “You know, if you like precision planning.”

“Suck it up, Leonard,” Penny giggled as she gave him a playful elbow.

“Yeah, suck it up,” echoed Howard as he batted his eyes.

“Gentlemen, we’re wasting time,” Sheldon barked as he stood and erased the map with his foot.

“‘Gentlemen’?” Penny snorted.

“It’s war, Penny. Social pleasantries are at a minimum,” he replied.

“But you’ll always be a woman to me,” Howard cooed.

Penny rolled her eyes as she put on her goggles.

“Don’t be a victim of friendly fire, Howard,” Leonard said as the rest of the gang prepared themselves for the assault.

Raj stood by the door while Sheldon counted down from his watch.

“Three, two, one!”

The door opened and Leonard and Howard went screaming out.

“They do know that totally gives their position away?” Penny said before darting after them.

“A general is only as good as his soldiers,” sighed Sheldon before following.

Raj exited last with a big grin on his face. He felt it in his bones. Today was the day things were going to change.

XxX

Things were not going to plan. From how the Finkelstein cohorts were moving about they must have eliminated Howard and Leonard during the last flurry of action. As there was no more exchange of gunfire Sheldon could only assume that Penny had similarly been tagged. He bit the inside of his cheek in thought. He had no idea if Raj was still active. If he was then the East Texan would have to change positions in order to give him a chance at getting the flag.

Sheldon scanned the surroundings and spotted a mini trench in the dirt about a hundred yards to his left. Slowly he disengaged from his position and slinked his way as best he could until thinning cover forced him to crawl on his belly. Fortunately, the Finkelsteins were too busy celebrating
their minor victory to notice him slither into the trench.

He pulled the container of paintballs from his belt and proceeded to load his weapon. At precisely this moment a motion caught his eye and he looked up to see a flash of blonde hair before he was bowled over by a flying body.

To his credit he didn’t cry out. Neither did his attacker.

“Shit, sorry sweetie,” Penny gasped as she caught her breath. “Didn’t know it was you before I leapt.”

“Need I remind you this is paintball not marine boot camp,” he wheezed back. His right arm was pinned between the trench wall and Penny’s body as the Nebraskan was lying on top of him.

“Sheldon, this is war,” Penny giggled, her breath tickling his neck.

“So it’d be prudent if you got off me before we’re discovered and summarily executed.”

She sat up, her legs straddling his thighs.

“You’re dirty,” she said as she brushed some mud from his cheek with her thumb.

“I’ve been crawling in dirt. You do the math,” he drawled.

As she scanned his face Penny noted that his usual sickly pallor was overtaken by redness from exertion, making the hollowness of his cheeks seem less pronounced. The dirt on his face was streaked as it had mixed with sweat. Combined with his camo gear she’d never seen him look so….

“You know you’re hot, Dr. C?” she purred.

“Of course I’m hot. I’ve been physically exerting myself for the past forty five minutes.”

Penny blinked before a snort of amusement escaped her lips and she got off him.

“Okay Sarge, what’s the plan?” she asked.

“This position provides the maximum amount of available cover,” he said as made sure his gun was ready to fire. “Assuming Raj is alive and in the vicinity of his original position we’ll assault from right to left in order for him to gain access to the flag.”

“And if he’s not it’s suicide.”

“Correct.”

“Lock and load,” Penny grinned. Sheldon nodded once before each took a position at either end of the trench.

“Three, two, one,” he said.

They popped up and began to fire.

XxX

Leonard and Howard were at the base camp waiting and chatting when Raj came skipping down the path waving the red flag. Behind him were a dirty and paint covered Penny and Sheldon.
“Awesome!” Howard and Leonard cheered as they hi-fived each other.

Penny snorted. “Yeah, like they did the work.”

“Let them celebrate; after all it is a team victory,” Sheldon replied evenly. “I’ll tell them they’ve been replaced by Lawrence Finkelstein and his cousin later.”

“If this is your idea of a miniature time machine I’d hate to see what a full size version is,” chuckled Howard as he used the screwdriver to unhook the five foot dish from the back of the machine.

“I just assumed,” Leonard replied sheepishly as he jammed a piece of cardboard in the elevator door to keep it open. “I mean who sells a full sized time machine for eight hundred dollars?”

“I think the better question is what type of person buys a full sized time machine?” grinned Raj. Sheldon shrugged as he opened the mailbox. “Leonard’s penchant towards authenticity in science fiction collectables leaves him vulnerable to overindulgences bordering on the ridiculous.”

“So why did you buy into it?” snapped Leonard.

“Just because you’re insane doesn’t mean I shouldn’t take advantage of the situation,” his roommate said. Here Sheldon grinned. “Besides, where else could I buy into a full sized time machine for two hundred dollars?”

“Okay that should do it,” Howard said. “Grab the sides and the dish should just lift out.” Sheldon and Raj went on one side and Leonard and Howard the other and all strained and lifted. “Higher!” Raj grimaced.

“Perhaps putting Howard and Leonard on the same side was a mistake,” gasped Sheldon.

“By God Gump, you’re a genius!” snapped the engineer.

They set the dish down and Sheldon and Howard traded places. Again they lifted and this time the dish cleared the mount. Shuffling as one the group set the dish against the wall and then let out a communal sigh of relief.

“That’s step one,” Leonard said. “Step two: get the machine in the elevator.”

“Now I see why mad scientist labs are all on one floor,” Raj mused. “Saves on the hernias.”

“Why would a time machine builder necessarily be mad?” Sheldon asked. “I’ve puzzled over time travel for years and I’m not insane.” The lanky man was oblivious to the others staring at him in disbelief. “So let’s test this out.” He pushed on the time machine and it didn’t move. “My, that’s heavy.”

“Well there are four of us so that divides the work. Basic physics,” Leonard said amiably as Raj, Howard and he joined Sheldon.

They pushed. It didn’t move. They pushed harder. It moved a couple of inches.

“You know what else physics says? We need muscles to do work.” Howard flexed his fingers trying to get feeling back into his hands.
From the stairs came the sound of Penny giggling. Quickly the four men went back to the time machine and stood in various poses pretending to think. From around the corner Penny and a hunky blonde haired man appeared and descended the stairs.

“Oh, hey Penny,” said Leonard.

“Hey guys,” she replied. “Listen there’s something wrong with the elevator.”

“No, I just jammed it so we could get the, uh, machine in the elevator.”

“Oh.” She peered at the contraption. “What is it?”

“It’s a time machine,” cooed Sheldon. Leonard pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

“Seriously?” asked Penny’s companion.

“Of course not, Mike,” she said before looking to Sheldon. “Right?”

“It is a time machine,” Sheldon said. “If, however, you mean a functioning time machine then the answer is no. It’s a movie prop from the movie The Time Machine.”

“Wow. Kinda big, huh?”

“Well it’d have to be since it carried actor Rod Taylor from Victorian England into the post-apocalyptic future, which society had splintered into two factions, the subterranean Morlocks, who survived by feasting on the flesh of the gentle surface dwelling Eloy.”

“I think that’s enough details for now,” Leonard sighed. “I’m sure Penny and her, uh, date would like to continue with their evening.”

“You need a hand with that, bro?” Mike asked.

“No, we’ve got it,” the bespectacled man said quickly.

“In what universe do we have it?” laughed Howard. “Oh, wait, the ones in which we’re telekinetic or cyborgs.”

Mike moved to the back of the time machine and gave it a shove towards the elevator. He then went to the front and lifted the end over the elevator threshold before pushing it inside.

“Thanks Mike,” Penny said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Leonard said sullenly as Mike went to Penny and put a hand around her waist. “Have a good night,” he said in mock cheerfulness.

“Night guys,” she said as Mike and she exited the lobby.

“Let’s get this puppy into the apartment,” Raj gushed as he raced up the stairs.

“Whatsoever,” Leonard said listlessly.

Sheldon turned to his roommate. “Is there something wrong?”

“I believe this is called aspiring hopes for coitus with Penny crashing into geek mountain,” Howard explained.
“Why? I thought you said your date with Penny was satisfactory?” Sheldon asked Leonard.

“Sheldon, girls like Penny never end up with guys who own time machines,” the engineer continued.

“But in the original film Rod Taylor got Yvette Mimeaux with our very same time machine,” countered the East Texan. “Besides, your basic premise is flawed. Penny has neither clones nor an identical twin so there are, in fact, no other girls like her.”

“Look can we just get it into the apartment?” gruffed Leonard as he stomped up the stairs.

“I’ll ride with the machine since I’ll fit in the elevator,” said Howard.

Sheldon nodded and ascended the stairs behind his roommate.

XxX

Sheldon came down the hall wearing his Flash shirt and plaid pants and stopped in the living room to stare thoughtfully at the time machine.

“It really is too big for the living room,” he tsked. He stepped towards it and put a hand on the lever. A moment more and then he climbed into and sat in the machine. Sheldon stared at the sequencer. He could go anywhen in time. Should he see what physics had discovered in the future? Perhaps he could go back and meet the members of the Manhattan Project and dazzle them with modern science?

Sheldon set the coordinates and pulled the lever. The disk behind him spun and lights flickered until the machine came to a stop. He got up and ventured to the apartment door, pausing for a moment to gather himself before opening it and stepping into the hall.

“Hi!” said a chipper female voice.

“Hello,” he replied and walked to apartment 4B. “I’m Sheldon. Your neighbor.”

“Penny,” grinned the blonde. “Nice to meet you, Sheldon.”

“I don’t know if you’ve had time for dinner but it is after five and you’re welcome to partake in Indian food at my apartment.”

“I’d love to,” she said and closed the door before following him.

“What’s that?” she gasped as she took in the giant contraption.

“It’s a time machine,” he replied.

Penny giggled. “Seriously?”

“Penny, I’m always serious.”

A Morlock came down the hall. “Wow, hi,” he said to Penny in Leonard’s voice.

“Hey,” she replied, “I’m Penny. I’m moving in across the hall.”

“That’s terrific! Say, you must be hungry. Let’s go get something to eat.”

“Sure,” she agreed.
“Actually I’ve invited her to eat with me,” Sheldon interjected.

“Sheldon, there’s no room with your stupid time machine in the living room,” the Morlock tsked as he took up his keys from the key bowl by the door. “Let’s go to Siam Palace. You’ll love the food,” he assured Penny as he gently pushed her out the door.

“Wait!” Sheldon cried. “I saw her first!”

The Morlock turned to him with a smarmy look on his face. 

“Sheldon, girls like Penny never end up with guys with time machines.” Pause. “Guys like you.”

The door closed

In bed Sheldon moaned as he tossed and turned.

“No Morlock,” he mumbled then slipped deeper into sleep.

xTBBTx

“So we’re on for the market on Sunday?” Raj asked Howard as they walked from the lunch line to the table.

“Of course. Once I’ve devoured the breakfast of champions I’ll be more than revved to charm the pants off some hippy chick,” grinned the engineer.

“Dude, you eat Eggos and chocolate milk. It’s the breakfast of eight year olds.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Howard noted Leonard sitting hunched over the table reading a document. The only thing he had in the line of lunch was a cup of coffee. “At least I’m actually eating—unlike Leonard.” Raj and he sat down. “What are you reading?”

“The Roommate Agreement,” Leonard replied. “Apparently I’d overlooked a few minor details. You know, don’t cook with cilantro, stand behind the designated lines in the bathroom to brush teeth or use the toilet. Aha!” He read silently. “Well he’s right. It’s here.”

“What is?” asked Raj.

“‘Once a quarter occupants of 2311 North Los Robles apartment 4A shall partake in an emergency preparedness drill to be done on the time and date specified by Sheldon Cooper.’”

“You mean he’s expecting the big one to hit California?” Howard took a bite of his casserole.

“He’s expecting everything,” snorted Leonard before taking a sip of coffee. “He woke me up at three am with a deck of cards containing cockamamie disaster scenarios like earthquakes, wild fires or a surprise invasion by Canada.”

“So what was last night’s disaster?”

“Technological Singularity has been achieved and artificial intelligence has run amuck. We had to neutralize threats in the apartment before securing it from outside invaders.” Here Leonard cracked a grin. “I took out our vacuum cleaner.”

Raj crunched on a carrot stick. “So how did it all end up?”

Leonard pulled out his phone. “He sent me the details: Readiness—unsatisfactory. Follows direction: adequate. Attitude: too much at times. Overall: Without prodding and direction I will be
one of many victims of the Machine Overlords.”

“Sucks to be you,” chuckled Howard.

“Actually I did pretty good considering it was my first drill,” countered the experimental physicist. “I did better than Penny at any rate.”

Raj choked on his sandwich and took a drink of water to get it all down.

“Sheldon actually got Penny onboard with this madness?” the engineer gasped.

Leonard chuckled. “He went across the hall; I heard her say, ‘it’s three in the frakken morning, Sheldon!’ and her door close; then he came back and said soberly that she’d already had a survival strategy called ‘cranky lady with a baseball bat’.”

Howard raised an eyebrow. “Sounds hot.”

“Oh, she was hot alright. I—” Leonard paused as he scrolled his phone. “Huh. Sheldon added a hundred and fifty dollars to my second month’s rent to cover my part of the emergency disaster kit which is really a bargain considering the price of dehydrated food alone.”

“Obviously Sheldon isn’t the only one who’s crazy,” Raj admonished lightly.

“Yeah, well my mother tested me for everything so I know I’m not crazy,” Leonard said crisply.

“That’s right. Know your psychological ailments, Raj,” Howard said in mock seriousness.

“No, Leonard’s not crazy he’s broken.”

“Ha ha,” Leonard grumbled before taking a sip of coffee.

Penny paced back and forth in her apartment trying to calm down but it wasn’t working.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid jackass,” she growled. “I can’t believe I was so stupid to think that he—”

She stopped dead as she spotted the iPod sitting on the coffee table. In two strides she was there and scooped up the device before stomping across the hall and knocked at 4A.

Sheldon opened the door. “Hello Penny.”

“Mind if I use your window?” she asked crisply.

“I suppose not,” he replied and stood aside while Penny flicked off her flip-flops and sprayed her feet before racing across the room to open the window.

“Hey Jerkface!” she yelled outside. “You forgot your iPod!” She tossed it as hard as she could before closing the window.

“Well that was rude,” Sheldon tsked.

“Oh, I’ll tell you rude,” his neighbor seethed. “That stupid self-centered bastard wrote about our sex life in his blog! I mean I’ve got prison inmates flooding my inbox with—” Penny stopped short as she realized that sitting between Howard and Raj on the couch was a strange woman with long, dark, curly brown hair and startling blue eyes that immediately grabbed the Nebraskan’s attention. “Oh, hi,” she said sheepishly.

“Hello,” the woman replied in an East Texas twang as she glanced curiously at Sheldon. “Shelly,
aren’t yuh gonna introduce us?”

“Oh very well,” the physicist huffed. “Penny, this is my twin Missy. Missy, my neighbor Penny.” At this Missy brightened.

“Ah was hopin’ tuh meet yuh,” she gushed. “Ah heard a lot about yuh from Mama.”

“Yeah,” Penny replied as a flush covered her cheeks. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t hear about this.”

“Muh lips are sealed,” Missy promised.

“Mother doesn’t read my Log,” added her brother.

Penny gawked at her neighbor. “You mean you’re going to write this down?”

“I make note of everything,” he countered evenly.

“But you have an…got a good memory! Why do you need to write it down?”

“Because every Starfleet captain has a Log.”

“What?”

“He’s right,” said Leonard. “Actually everybody on the Enterprise had a personal Log.” He caught Penny’s unimpressed glare and averted his eyes to stare at the floor.

She stuck out a finger warningly at Sheldon. “Do not put this in your Log. God, it’s bad enough I’m in one blog already. Man, I wish I could erase it.”

“Not that it would do anything,” Sheldon said. “If what you said earlier is true it’s likely your intimate details have been copied all over the internet. For instance,” he took out his phone. “Were I to cross reference ‘Penny’ with ‘Mike’ and the more colloquial term for intercourse I’m sure—”

“Oh my God don’t look it up!” She snatched his phone from his hand.

“Don’t throw it out the window!” he cried.

Penny stared at the Google screen and saw a whole list of search results for Sheldon’s query. She squeaked out an “I’m sorry” and handed back the phone before dashing from the apartment.

“Charmin’ as ever Shelly,” Missy said with a shake of the head.

“What did I do?” her brother asked.

“Remember in university when yuh made that math error on yuhr—”

“What’s your point?” he snapped.

“Well what if ah had posted it all over the ‘net for people tuh see?”

“I’ll go check on Penny,” said Leonard as he got out of his chair.

“No.” Sheldon said firmly. “I’ll go.”

“She’s already mad at you,” his roommate warned.
“I’ve breached the Friendship Agreement by causing undue distress. I’m obligated by Section Four paragraph six to make this right.” Sheldon went out the door and across the hall.

“What’s the Friendship Agreement?” asked Missy. “Is he still makin’ up contracts?”

“Wait until Leonard tells you about the Roommate Agreement,” chuckled Howard.

Over at 4B Sheldon knocked at the door and called Penny by name.

“Go away, Sheldon,” came her reply.

He knocked again. “Penny.”

“Go away!”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Silence.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock

The door opened.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Penny spat, her cheeks damp with tears.

“Nothing,” Sheldon replied. “Penny,” he said out the side of his mouth. “I’ve been informed that’s not the case with you.”

She closed her eyes and took a breath before retreating from the door to the kitchen. Sheldon stepped into the apartment and closed the door.

“While I’m not responsible for posting your intimate details online it has been pointed out to me that you find the whole encounter humiliating,” he said.


“Gathering from your age, occupation, sentence complexity and recreational activities I would say you’re not intellectually challenged. As for your second premise I’m not sure of the loser scale to accurately judge Mike. Whereas you determine him to be a ‘giant’ loser he may in fact be a ‘colossal’ loser.”

In spite of herself Penny chuckled. “Yeah, I like colossal.” She sighed. “I just don’t get what’s wrong with me. There could be a million nice guys in the room and I go for the loser every time.”

“While my interactions with people are limited it has been my experience that nice people tend to be in the minority,” Sheldon replied.

“I guess.” She sighed again. “You know, just once, I would like to go out with someone who is nice and honest and who actually cares about me.”

“Perhaps you should broaden your parameters. As it stands Leonard and Howard are eliminated from your selection based on the honesty quotient.”

“Howard’s also a douche.”
“He did rig the university computers to set up ‘bring your teenage daughter to work’ day that ultimately resulted in Dennis Kim leaving to spend time with a new girlfriend.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Although he does have what I can only describe as a ‘creepy candy coating’.”

Penny laughed. “Yeah he’s something alright.” Pause. “Nice, honest and cares about me. Almost describes you, y’know, if you actually cared about me,” she teased.

“Of course I care about your wellbeing. We’re friends. ‘Like’ has nothing to do with it,” he shrugged.

Her jaw dropped but she quickly gathered herself.

“‘Like’ has everything to do with it, Sheldon. People are not friends with people they don’t like.”

“Ah.” Pause. “Well I don’t dislike you.”

“That’s good,” she smiled. “For the record I like you, Dr. C.”

He nodded. “A strong indicator you’re not intellectually incapacitated.”

“Okay genius, so what do I do about Mike?”

“I’m not sure there’s anything to be done. Does either one of you possess the other’s property?”

“No.”

“That severs physical ties. I suppose that only leaves emotional ones but that’s an area I’m unfamiliar with so you’re on your own.” He cocked his head. “Although when I’m feeling particularly blue I go to the koala pen at the zoo.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Then I recommend you go sometime.” He checked his watch, missing her big-ass grin. “Now if we’ve sufficiently resolved your emotional turmoil I should get back to my sister.”

“Yeah I should probably introduce myself properly.” Penny grabbed her keys and the pair exited her apartment.

“Tell me Missy, do you like pajamas?” asked Raj.

“Ah guess.”

“They’re Indian.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “You’re welcome.”


Leonard clapped a hand to his forehead and winced.

“And on that note,” Penny said overly loud as Sheldon and she entered.

“My yuh’re back,” Missy said overenthusiastically as she popped off the couch. “Ah missed yuh, Shelly.”

“That’s odd,” he said as he took the antibacterial spray from Penny and sprayed the bottoms of his slippers. “Nobody usually misses me. In fact I’m often told to go away.”
“How are you feeling?” Leonard asked Penny.

“Better,” she replied. “Cuddles here made everything roses,” she said with a smirk as she indicated Sheldon with her head.

“‘Cuddles’. Hardly,” Sheldon snorted as he went to his computer and sat.

“So Missy, what brings you to town?” Penny sat on the arm of Leonard’s chair.

“Muh friend’s celebratin’ her big three-oh an’ she’s never been tuh Disney World so we thought what the heck an’ here we are,” said Missy as she made to stand near Sheldon. “‘Sides, Mama had papers for Shelly tuh sign from our daddy’s estate.”

“Something which could have been mailed,” Sheldon interjected as he worked on his computer.

“But then ah wouldn’t be able tuh check in on muh brother an’ see his new squeeze,” Missy teased. Sheldon straightened in his chair.

“‘Squeeze’?” Leonard repeated as he looked questioningly at Penny.

“Just cuddling,” Penny said innocently.

“‘Cuddling’?”

“More like mauling,” amended Sheldon as he resumed typing.

“Since when do I maul you?” asked Penny.

“As things stand you’ve mauled me twice.”

“I was cheering you up,” she snapped.

“Is that what they call it?” he said. “Alright, but I’m not sure what you were cheering me up for at Halloween when you”—here Penny’s jaw dropped as she rushed from her chair.

“That’s enough Sheldon!” she said excitedly. She clapped a hand on both of his shoulders causing him to flinch.

“See? She’s doing it again!” he growled.

“Oh shush,” Missy chuckled. “Don’t mind Shelly, he’s been all weird-like with touchin’ his whole life. Must be because we spent nine months together with muh legs wrapped ‘round his head.”

“That’d be awesome were it not incestuous,” Howard said. Both Sheldon and Missy gave him a stern look.

“Well, ah’d best be on muh way,” said Missy. “It’s a pain drivin’ in rush hour tuh Anaheim but —”

“No!” Howard and Raj blurted. Both men turned to Leonard for help.

“You could always stay here,” Leonard offered.

“Thanks but ah don’t think so. Shelly doesn’t like company.”
“But Leonard does,” countered Howard. “And as the place is fifty percent his you should take his invitation.”

Missy was thoughtful. “Well it’d save me money on a hotel. The party’s not until Sunday.”

“Then it’s settled,” Howard said happily.

“That reminds me,” said Raj as he looked to Leonard. “You still want that Superman Son of Krypton action figure for your birthday?”

Leonard felt Penny and Missy staring at him and he blushed. “Uh, no…. I said I wanted more paintball ammo. You know, because I like to shoot.”

“Can’t hit anything but he likes to shoot,” Howard teased him, garnering a glare.

“It’s your birthday?” asked Penny.

“Yeah. It’s tomorrow,” said Leonard. She smacked him on the arm.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“It’s no big deal. Just another year older is all.”

“Well yeah. Sounds like a reason to get drunk right there,” Penny teased before remembering with whom she was talking. “Okay, well, normal people would get drunk.”

“My parents focused on celebrating achievements and being expelled from a birth canal wasn’t considered one of them,” Leonard shrugged.

“That’s so sad,” Penny sighed.

Sheldon turned in his computer chair to address the group.

“Actually it’s to be envied. I wish I grew up without that anguish,” he said.

Penny raised an eyebrow. “Anguish?” Missy chuckled.

“Yuh should have seen the pout on his puss when Mama put the birthday hat on his head,” she said.

“Not to mention being blindfolded and spun towards a grotesque tailless donkey as the other children mocked my disorientation,” Sheldon muttered.

“Well at least we had a bouncy castle.”

“An overcrowded, sweaty hell.”

“It’s amazing you both blew out the same candles,” said Raj before taking a sip of beer.

“God Lord, no!” squawked Sheldon.

“We had two cakes: mine which we blew out the candles on an’ a little one for Shelly,” explained Missy. “It was easier this way since he kept insistin’ I get a physical before blowin’ on the cake.”

“You were expelling spittle. The last thing I want to imbibe is influenza,” sniffed her brother.

“Or cooties,” winked Penny.
Leonard checked his watch. “Well dinner should be ready.” He got up and made for the door to put on his shoes. “Missy, you and Penny can eat here.”

“So long as you have food of your own,” said Sheldon.

“Sheldon, we can share,” countered Raj.

“Yeah Shelly, we can share,” agreed Howard.

“We’re not hippies. Adding fifty percent to our number means a caloric reduction in complex carbohydrates and vegetables needed to stimulate my bowels. Unacceptable.” Here Sheldon narrowed his eyes at Howard. “And don’t ever call me ‘Shelly’.”

“Actually I was going to order pizza and watch Sex and the City,” said Penny. She turned to Missy. “If that grabs ya you’re more than—”

“God yes,” Missy said quickly as she took in Howard and Raj’s stares.

“Okay, well I’ll be back.” Leonard grabbed his keys and left.

Penny crept her way to the door and put an ear to it before looking through the peephole. Once she was satisfied Leonard was gone she turned to the room.

“Okay, tomorrow we’re throwing Leonard a kick-ass birthday party,” she said.

“Oh no we’re not,” countered Sheldon.


“I can always ask my friends to come,” offered Penny.

“Sounds great to me,” smiled Raj.

“Excuse me but didn’t you hear Leonard say that he didn’t celebrate his birthday?” said Sheldon as he folded his arms across his chest. “Besides which this is my apartment and I’m extremely uncomfortable with dancing, loud music and most other forms of alcohol induced frivolity.”

“Come on, Sheldon,” pouted Penny. “He needs something to make up for his childhood.”

“Ah could always stay an’ help,” offered Missy.

At this Howard popped up with his arms over his head.

“It’s on!” he cried triumphantly. Sheldon made to protest but stopped short as the engineer gave him a maniacal look. “Sheldon, time to put the crazy aside. The lovely Penny and Missy have decided to call in Penny’s equally lovely friends to celebrate Leonard’s birthday. Now suck. It. Up.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Fine. But it won’t be here.”

“Fine, we’ll have it at my place,” replied Penny with a fixed stare. “But since you’re being difficult you have to help clean it for tomorrow.”

“Most definitely not. This isn’t my cockamamie idea.”

“It’s a Tier One Friendship Request,” Penny said crisply.
“You can’t make every request ‘Level One’ or else we might as well just call them ‘requests’,” Sheldon squawked.

“As you please. I’m requesting you to be at my place tomorrow to help clean it.” Penny smiled sweetly. “Boy I’m glad we signed that Friendship Thingie.” She opened the door and Missy winked at her brother before following Penny out.

“What fresh hell is this?” growled Sheldon before stomping off to his room.

Raj leaned back on the couch and pumpkin grinned. “Par-tay bay-be!”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Paintball
Penny’s jaw dropped as she stared at Missy.

“Oh my God, really?”

“Yep. Ah had tuh go through the entire second grade with crooked eyebrows muh Mama drew on,” chuckled Missy as she gathered the magazines strewn about Penny’s apartment. “Ah was really mad he tampered with muh Easy Bake Oven but ah guess it’s just part of the perils of havin’ a rocket scientist for a brother.”

“I thought he was a theoretical physicist?” Penny took an armful of clothes into her bedroom.

“Yeah. But it drives him nuts when ah call him a rocket scientist.”

“He needs that,” Penny agreed as she returned to the living room to straighten her shelving unit. “I mean he’s kinda kooky in some ways but there’s other things that I wonder if he’s like that because he’s alone here, y’know?”

“He’s always liked his privacy. When family would come tuh visit Mama would force him tuh come intuh the livin’ room but he’d never stay,” Missy recalled. “She was always forcin’ Shelly tuh interact even though things rarely worked out well for him.”

Penny turned to her companion. “You mean the neighborhood kids.”

“Ah mean just about everyone. Neighbor kids, school kids.” The East Texan chuckled. “He was a menace at Sunday School. The pastor actually thumped him on the head with a Bible.”

“Wow.”

Missy brought some newly discovered dishes to the sink. “Don’t get me wrong, Shelly and ah went round an’ round when we were little but ah did love him. Still do. It was just difficult at times understandin’ him ‘cause he never acted like a brother who cared about me.”

“I know that one. You know what he said when I told him I liked him?” Here Penny twanged her voice. “‘Well I don’t dislike you.’” Both women laughed.

“Listen,” Missy said slowly and immediately Penny could sense the change in tone. “Ah don’t mean tuh be pressin’ but Shelly’s always been clueless when it comes tuh people so ah try muh best tuh steer him clear.” She regarded the Nebraskan. “Ah’m not sayin’ ah don’t want yuh tuh be friends with muh brother, only that ah won’t put up with anyone playin’ with him. Yuh bein’ his friend, yuh know how much it lit Mama’s face when she said Shelly had an actual friend?”

“Yeah it really blew me away when he said that I was his first,” nodded Penny.

“So’s we’re straight here: yuh play it right with him or else ah’m comin’ back an’ we’ll have business.”
Green eyes met blue.

“I swear Missy, I’m not screwing with him,” Penny said firmly. At this Missy grinned.

“Ah know. Just had tuh get it out there is all. So.” She clapped her hands. “This gets the prelims done. Now all we need is Shelly tuh give the place a spit shine an’ we’re in business.”

“Okay,” said Penny as she went to the washroom. “I’ve got some cleaners under the sink.”

“Don’t bother. If ah know Shelly he’s got himself a department store of cleaners an’ disinfectants. While ah’d be out playin’ he’d spend his time with his imaginary friends cleanin’ his room with different concoctions he’d made up tuh sanitize the place.”

Knock Knock Knock “Missy and Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Missy and Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Missy and Penny.”

“Door’s open, Sheldon,” Penny called.

“My arms are full,” came his reply.

Missy went to the door and opened it to reveal her brother with a box of cleaning products.

“Well bless muh soul if it ain’t Molly Maid come tuh the rescue,” Missy said teasingly.

“My sister insists she’s amusing,” Sheldon tsked as he bee-lined to the coffee table. He took out an antibacterial cloth from the open dispenser and wiped the table’s surface before setting down the box.

“Ah am amusin’. Yuh just don’t have a discernable sense of humor, Shelly.”

“That’s not completely true,” said Penny from the door to her bedroom. “He has an awesome laugh.”

“Exactly,” he sniffed to his sister.

“Although he does sound like an asthmatic man gasping for air,” added the waitress garnering a glare from the physicist.

“I see you’ve gathered your clutter,” he said crisply. “I’ll clean the living room while you do your bathroom.” He held out a spray bottle and Penny came over to collect it. “Use this to sanitize.” He grabbed another bottle. “Use this for the chrome and your mirror. Don’t forget the handle behind the toilet tank.”

“Yes boss,” Penny chuckled. “You going to come inspect it after?”

“That would mean I’d have to enter your bedroom which, at this point, with the amount of dirty laundry on the floor would be walking through a biohazard.”

“Don’t sweat it, Penny, ah’ll help yuh,” said Missy. “We’ll just leave Shelly tuh his play friends an’ they’ll have the place ship-shape in no time.”

“They were not friends, they were imaginary colleagues,” he countered as he slipped on a pair of latex gloves. “Besides, I have one point five friends.”
“One point five?”

“Leonard has merely agreed to the Friendship Clause in the Roommate Agreement whereas Penny has signed the full Friendship Agreement—which she uses against me to do things I don’t particularly wish to do I may add.”

“Yuh’re right, that’s not fair,” Missy mock tsked. “Ah mean why have Penny go through mounds of paperwork tuh get yuh tuh do things when all it takes is a knee tuh yuhr testicles.”

Sheldon turned to his sister. “I believe they call that assault.”

“Naa, it’s grabbin’ a bull by the horns. An’ it takes one tuh know one.”

“You guys are Taurus?” gasped Penny.

“May eighth,” confirmed Missy.

“That explains so much!” The two women ventured into the bathroom.

Sheldon shook his head and began to clean.

XxX

“Thanks for dinner,” gushed Leonard as Missy and he rode the elevator to his floor. “It was really nice.”

“Yuh’re welcome darlin’,” she smiled. “Ah couldn’t have yuh by yuhr lonesome on yurh birthday no matter what yuh say.”

“Too bad Penny got called in to work,” he sighed.

A twinkle came to Missy’s eyes.

“Why Leonard, am ah sensin’ a raccoon droolin’ in the hen house?” she cooed.

“Maybe,” he said shyly as the doors opened and they stepped into the hall.

“Well speakin’ of Penny she said she had somethin’ for me in her apartment but ah don’t like pryin’ alone if yuh know my meanin’.”

“Sure, no problem.” Leonard waited as she unlocked Penny’s door.

“After yuh,” she said and he entered and turned on the overhead light.

All at once the concealed party guests jumped up.

“SURPRISE!”

Leonard let out a yelp and stepped back into Missy, who helped him stand straight. Penny dashed from behind the kitchen counter to the door.

“Happy Birthday, Leonard!” she gushed happily. In response he smiled even as his hands went to his pockets as if to search for something. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he gasped as he pulled out his inhaler and shook it.

Penny paled. “Oh my God are you asthmatic?”
“It’s no big deal,” he said and took a huff. He gave a closed mouth wide smile as he held his breath.

“Now that we’ve nearly succeeded in killing Leonard can I go?” asked Sheldon as he came up to Penny.

“Shelly, this is a party,” his sister chided. “We agreed yuh’d stay fifteen minutes.”

“Well it doesn’t mean it has to be the first fifteen much less consecutive minutes,” he huffed. He caught Missy’s eyes narrow and he covered his testicles as he took a step back.

“Let’s get it on, people!” shouted Raj who raised his bottle of beer even as he started the stereo. Immediately the apartment was abuzz with revelers going for alcoholic beverages that had appeared on the counter.

Sheldon covered his ears with his hands and stood next to the door with a scowl on his face as Penny and Missy took Leonard to the counter for a drink. The lanky man stared at Howard as he slid a shot over to Penny who then gave it to Leonard. Not sure what to do Leonard toasted the air.

“Opa!” he said and downed the drink. He began to cough and Penny pounded him on the back.

“Only twenty six more to go,” laughed Penny.

“Actually the bladder can only hold about sixteen ounces of liquid,” Leonard replied.

“I happen to have a bathroom, y’know.”

“Oh.” He grinned. “Yeah.”

“Ah think we’ll pace this horse,” Missy chuckled as she turned to her brother.

The door was open and Sheldon was gone.

XxX

Penny gave a ‘shave and a haircut’ knock at 4A before opening the door. Sheldon swiveled in his computer chair.

“I didn’t say you could come in,” he said.

“Well you didn’t say I couldn’t,” she replied easily. Sheldon folded his arms across his chest.

“Penny, there’s a social protocol whereby a person’s knock at the door is answered by the dweller. If people could just come and go as they pleased we might as well not have any doors.”

“Eyah. How about we get philosophical later,” she said. “It’s time for cake. Can you get it for me?”

Sheldon went to the refrigerator and pulled out the cake.

“You’re sure there’s no dairy in it?” he asked. “Because Leonard won’t be allowed in the apartment if it does.”

“Positive. Wait! You’ve got to put candles in it.”

Sheldon sighed as he took the pack of birthday candles from the counter and proceeded to place
the candles on the cake.

“I’d ask if there was anything else you expect me to do but I’ve no interest in jumping through a hoop tonight,” he drawled.

“Come on, Sheldon, it’s not that bad,” Penny laughed. “I mean you’re not wearing a birthday hat.”

“No amount of requests will see that horror repeat itself,” he said as he picked up the cake and brought it to the door.

“Noted.” Penny flicked the lighter she had in hand and lit the first candle. “This is a weird candle pattern,” she said as she picked up the candle and continued lighting the others.

“It’s in the shape of my favorite amino acid,” Sheldon replied.

“Of course,” she said with a shake of the head. “Why does everything have to be science with you?”

“Penny, there wouldn’t be anything without science,” Sheldon tsked. “For instance, your candle flame is the result of oxidation reactions which essentially vaporize the wick. Flames are the visible light emitted by highly excited electrons decaying to lower energy levels, which explains why different chemical materials have different color flame.”

“I just like spinning the lighter wheel and poof! We have fire!”

Sheldon frowned. “Perhaps the proper question is why are you so ignorant of science?”

“Because I’m busy living life, Sheldon,” she said sweetly. “Now gimme the cake.”

“You’re sure you’re not too inebriated to carry it?”

Immediately a flash of Sheldon standing before her wrapped in his comforter came to Penny’s mind.

“I don’t get drunk anymore,” she said firmly.

“A wise decision,” he said evenly as he opened his door.

“Grab your keys, Sherlock, you’re coming with me.”

“Given the diminished level of sobriety and loud noise in your apartment I’d rather abstain.”

“But it’s tradition everyone comes and sings Happy Birthday,” she pouted. “You have to come.”

He paused. “So you’re saying this is a non optional social convention?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Oh, alright.” He grabbed his keys from the bowl and they both exited the apartment.

“Happy Birthday to you,” Penny began to sing as she walked into her living room.

The rest of the revelers joined in and Leonard was absolutely ecstatic as he saw the chocolate cake with his name and ‘Happy Birthday’ on it.

“Cool, the candles look like the lysine amino acid,” he slurried. Penny turned to Sheldon who gave
her a ‘see I told you’ smirk.

“Make a wish, silly pie,” Missy prodded. The physicist closed his eyes and blew out the candles. Raj handed him the knife to cut the cake.

“The ritual’s complete,” said Sheldon and turned to go only to be stopped by Penny’s hand on his arm.

“Not so fast. It’s cake time,” she said.

“No thank you.”

Penny made a grim smile as they locked eyes.

“Sheldon, it’s your point five’s night and you’re going to support him, kapieche?”

Missy smiled to herself as she saw Penny drag her brother over to the counter and hand him a piece of cake and a fork.

“Just one bite,” Penny said.

“No,” Sheldon replied firmly.

“It’s bad luck if everyone doesn’t have a piece.”

“Penny, there’s no such thing as luck, good or bad. Really, your belief in superstitious nonsense is incredible.”

“So take a bite before I toss you in the cannibal pot.”

“I hardly doubt cannibals ate birthday cake.”

“Did Missy have a particular testicle she liked to hit first?”

Sheldon glared as he took a piece of inner cake and popped it into his mouth. Penny took a plate for herself and took a bite.

“Good cake, huh?” she said with her mouth full.

“It’s moist and spongy and the icing is both smooth and chocolaty without being overly sweet,” he said. “Now if you’ll excuse me I’ve got to go sanitize my mouth.” Sheldon handed the cake and fork to Penny and walked away.

XxX

Sheldon heard a noise at the door before it opened and Leonard came into the room supported on either side by Penny and Missy.

“Honey, I’m home,” he slurred happily.

“Shelly, come take him tuh bed,” said Missy.

Sheldon saved what he was working on and closed the laptop.

“I don’t see why this is my responsibility,” he grumbled as both Penny and his sister walked Leonard to the couch where he flopped on the arm.
“He’s you roomate and it’s what they do.”

“It’s not in the Agreement,” he countered. Missy sighed.

“It’s an unwritten one.”

“So what’s happening?” Leonard asked Penny.

“Bedtime for bonzo, chum,” she replied.

“Cool,” he grinned goofily and leaned his head on her shoulder.

Missy barely had time to step aside as Sheldon flew to Leonard’s side and firmly gripped his arm and lifted his roommate.

“Where are you taking me?” Leonard asked.

“To bed. You’re inebriated,” Sheldon said crisply.

“Ahh.” Leonard looked to Penny. “This is the best birthday ever.”

Penny smiled. “You’re welcome, sweetie.”

Sheldon and Leonard shuffled to the hall before the shorter man stopped and turned to the ladies.

“I didn’t tell you my wish,” Leonard said.

“What is it?” asked Penny.

“I wished I could go on a date with you.”

Penny’s eyes widened. “Oh.” She took in Leonard’s earnest face. “Um, sure.”

“Cool,” he said dreamily.

“You’ll see yourselves out,” Sheldon said as he practically dragged Leonard down the hall.

“I’ll give the stragglers a half hour more and then I’m kicking people out,” said Penny as the two women left the apartment.

Missy closed the door after herself with a grim look on her face.

XxX

Missy came out of the washroom wearing a pair of sleep shorts and camisole and went to the living room where her brother was laying out sheets and blankets on the couch.

“Thanks again for lettin’ me stay in you room, Shelly,” she said. “Ah know it isn’t comfortable for yuh.”

“While your stay was unexpected I didn’t want you going back to Mama and saying I wasn’t doing my utmost to accommodate you,” he replied.

“Still it’s appreciated.” The twins looked at each other.

“You’re welcome,” Sheldon said before taking off his housecoat.
“That Penny’s quite a gal,” Missy said slowly as she leaned against the hall wall. “Ah can see why yuh like her.”

“I’m her friend. Apparently that obligates me to ‘like her’,” he said as he folded his housecoat and set it on the arm of Leonard’s chair. Missy shook her head.

“Ah don’t know how yuh’re measurin’ it, Shelly, but it ain’t just friendship yuh’re workin’ with.”

For his part Sheldon straightened to regard his sister.

“Am I doing something wrong?” he said in a voice that to all but his twin sounded like a casual remark.

She smiled warmly. “Nothin’ at all.”

“Well don’t alarm me like that,” he twanged as he settled himself on the couch. “There’s already a plethora of variables regarding Penny’s idiosyncrasies I’ve yet to master.” He straightened the covers and lay back on his pillow. “I’m trying to be her friend but she baffles me.”

“Yuh’ll figure it out, Shellybean,” said Missy as she clicked off the light. “‘Night.”

“Good night,” Sheldon replied and slipped the sleep mask over his eyes.

xTBBTx

Penny narrowed her eyes, her tongue slightly sticking out and clamped between her teeth as she focused on the television screen.

“That’s it,” Leonard said encouragingly. “Now remember that you’ve got more than your pulse rifle—”

“Yeah, yeah, grenades, sniper rifle,” she mumbled as her thumbs and fingers worked the rumble joystick.

Sheldon came out of the washroom holding his stomach. Leonard and he came home late from the university so dinner was rushed before they dashed to the comic store. Needless to say the digestive distress was extreme and Sheldon asked his roommate to take him home.

“How are you feeling?” asked Leonard as the lanky man sat down in his spot.

“Better now that I’ve taken something for the acid reflux,” Sheldon replied. “Next time I don’t care what Gablehauser has to say I’m leaving at—”

“No talking,” Penny growled and there was a flurry of activity as her avatar hurdled her way through the wrecked urban landscape.

“You’re playing Halo,” Sheldon said. “You didn’t tell me you played Halo.”

“She didn’t until fifteen minutes ago,” grinned Leonard before an explosion took his attention. “Damn!” He clicked furiously and the controller quaked in his hands before all went dead.

“So why did she manage to corner and kill you?”

“Guess I like hunting the most dangerous game, too,” Penny crowed as she set the controller on her lap. “Sorry for taking your place, sweetie,” she said to Sheldon. “But you were in the washroom when I came in and Leonard was playing so I thought what the heck.”
“Fortunately we have two more controllers,” said Sheldon as he got up to fetch a controller from the box by the game unit.

“No, it’s okay. You can have mine.”

“Penny, until Raj and Howard arrive it’ll only be Leonard and me—hardly competitive.”

“Hey!” whined Leonard. “I’m not that bad.”

“I’m not saying you’re bad, only that I’m that go—”

Penny picked up her controller and clicked a button.

“Wow,” she giggled. “Who did I just blow up?”

“Me,” snapped Sheldon. “Hardly sportsmanlike since I wasn’t ready to—”

Another explosion.

“Oops,” she said innocently although her face was all business.

“Woman, you are playing with forces beyond your ken,” Sheldon growled as he clicked furiously.

“Yeah, well your Ken can kiss my Barbie.”

Several sounds of laser fire filled the room. Leonard moved his avatar to a hiding position so he could watch Penny as she took apart Sheldon. There was absolutely no doubt about it: Penny was a natural. The East Texan was hard-pressed to keep her at bay.

“This is fun,” Penny chuckled.

“This is war,” Sheldon said with a frown.

More clicking. Another explosion.

“Look, it’s raining you!” Penny said triumphantly.

“This is fun,” laughed Leonard, garnering a glare from his roommate.

Two knocks at the door preceded Howard and Raj entering the apartment.

“Howdy gents,” said Howard. “Holy smokes is Penny playing Halo?”

“She’s kicking Sheldon’s butt,” said Leonard gleefully.

“She’s not ‘kicking my butt’,” snapped Sheldon as he maneuvered his avatar into position.

Howard and Raj came to stand behind the couch and watch the television.

“Beauty and can use a pulse rifle. Marry me,” the engineer gushed.

“Nice try,” said Penny as she did her best to find Sheldon.

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity and before she could do anything she was down for the count.

“Muah, ha, ha,” chortled Sheldon.
“Man, I didn’t even see you,” Penny snorted.

“Mock my skill, will you?”

“Still, you’ve got to admit Penny’s pretty good for a newbie,” Leonard said.

“She’s…adequate,” Sheldon conceded.

“And with that complement,” she laughed as she stood and handed Raj her controller. “Thanks for the password, Leonard.”

“No problem,” he replied. Sheldon looked inquiringly at him.

“Password to what?”

“Penny needed to look some thing up online so she’s using our wifi to—”

“You’ve compromised the integrity of our wifi?!” Sheldon twanged.

“It’s no biggie,” said Penny. “I’ll just be on it for a few minutes. See ya.” She closed the door behind her.

“We didn’t discuss this,” seethed Sheldon.

“I didn’t think it was a big deal,” countered Leonard.

“Here we go,” chuckled Raj.

“No big deal?” squawked Sheldon. “No big—Leonard you might as well have invited Penny in to loot the apartment.”

“She’s using bandwidth, not rooting through your underwear drawer,” Leonard sighed.

“Suppose she’s committing online fraud? Or selling State secrets to North Korea? It’ll trace back to us.”

Leonard just stared at his roommate before getting out of his chair.

“I’m going to the washroom and when I return we’re playing Halo,” he huffed and stalked off.

“Remind me to buy you a copy of ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’, ” Raj said to Sheldon.

“I don’t want any more friends,” Sheldon said crisply. “The ones I have are problematic enough.” He got up and went to the refrigerator for a bottled water.

“And I think we know what that problem is,” Howard said quietly to Raj.

xTBBTx

Leonard came into the living room a nervous mess.

“So how do I look?” he squeaked.

Sheldon turned in his computer chair.

“Well the second shower helped. Your armpits no longer look like flood zones,” he said evenly.
“Great,” Leonard sighed. “This is going to be great.” He began to pace. “Only five more minutes and I go and pick up Penny and we’ll have a nice meal and maybe a drink or two and then a walk in the park or beach and maybe we’ll—”

“I don’t see how this concerns me,” Sheldon said crisply before returning to his computer. “What Penny and you consent to do is between yourselves.”

“Of course it is. I’m not seeking approval I’m just running through my game plan.”

Sheldon stopped typing to regard his roommate. “So Penny is a game to you?”

“Of course not!” Leonard snapped. “I need a plan for tonight because if I wing it I’ll screw it up.”

“Huh.”

Leonard stopped pacing and frowned. “What’s ‘huh’?”

“Well it’s just my understanding that Penny prefers to ‘work on the fly’ as it were. I think today’s urban youth call it ‘keeping it real’.”

“Having a plan doesn’t mean I’m not ‘keeping it real’. In fact I’d say I’m prepared for anything. For instance, at the date’s end I walk her to the door. I give her a kiss on the cheek and ask to see her again. Maybe she suggests the date isn’t finished yet and invites me in for coffee.”

“As she keeps coming here for morning coffee I find it highly unlikely she’d invite you in for coffee,” Sheldon sniffed.

“It’s not real coffee. It’s an euphemism for coitus. Oh God, coitus!” Leonard took out his puffer and gave it a shake before taking a dose.

“I see.” Sheldon cocked his head in thought. “So when she comes over for coffee she’s actually been propositioning you?”

Leonard was still holding his breath so all he could do was stare incredulously at his roommate. There was a knock at the door and he took a deep breath before going to answer it. Penny stood before him in a cute flowered dress and a nervous smile.

“You look nice,” he sputtered.

“So do you,” she replied as she took in his dress shirt, sport coat and crisp beige pants. “Listen, I finally made it to the store so I just wanted to thank you.” She gave him a can of coffee. “I doubt it’s your brand but the clerk at the store said it was good.”

“Thanks, though it’s not necessary. I like having you over for coffee.”

She smiled. “Well I don’t mind making that a tradition.”

Leonard turned to Sheldon. “Take coffee off the shopping list. Penny just gave me a tin.”

“You tramp!” Sheldon said to Penny before storming to his room.

Penny was openmouthed as she gawked at Leonard.

“What the hell was that about?” she said.

“Uh, hard to tell with Sheldon,” stammered Leonard as he set the coffee tin on the side shelf and took his keys. “His mom warned him about taking drugs so he’s a little sensitive over the—” He
checked his watch. “Look, we’re going to miss our reservation!”

They exited and he shut the door behind them.

XxX

Penny laughed. “So that’s when I learned that there’s a correct way to assemble a hamburger.” She took a sip of her dessert wine.

“Actually the variables for burger assembly rely on what ingredients are on hand,” said Leonard. “For instance if you had ketchup, mustard, cheese, tomato and pickles there’s a hundred and twenty combinations.”

“You think Sheldon’s tried them all?”

“It’s a possibility. He went over his scrambled egg experiment with me and it was pretty thorough.”

“Do I even want to know?” Penny asked.

“At the end of the day he concluded that they’re as good as they’re ever going to be,” smiled Leonard. “No difference if they’re white, brown, large, small, free range, etcetera.”

“Wow. Just when I thought the weaving was weird enough.” She took another sip of wine.

“I don’t think I’ll even ask.” Leonard took a sip of water. “So anyways this was nice. Thanks for coming out with me.”

“Yeah, it was fun,” she agreed with a smile. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been out to a fancy dinner with a guy. I mean since Kurt it’s only been a bunch of rebound sex, you know?”

“Yeah,” Leonard said with a neutral face.

“Actually Sheldon’s been the first guy I’ve met since then that I haven’t slept with.” Leonard nodded as he took a sip of his wine. “And now I’ve met you.” Her dinner companion began to choke. “Leonard?” She got out of her chair and gave his back a thump.

“Thanks,” he squeaked before clearing his airway with a couple of coughs.

“Didn’t want to end the night with a little CPR,” she said, relieved.

“It’s okay,” Leonard blushed. “So you were saying you met me. Yeah I guess you did. I mean we wouldn’t be here now if we hadn’t met.” He took in Penny’s odd look. “Go on,” he said awkwardly.

“It’s just that I’ve had male friends but they’re usually pre-boyfriends, y’know? Sheldon’s different.” Here she laughed. “He wanted absolutely nothing to do with me.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“It’s really not a shock. I mean he’s a brainiac who came up with experiments I can’t even pronounce when he was five.” Penny shook her head. “I’m like a blonde monkey.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

She sat back and grinned. “You know I tried to impress him by saying I was a community college graduate?”
“Oh really? What did you take?” asked Leonard.

“Uh, gen. ed.”

“I mean what did you graduate in?”

Penny leaned forward. “Tell you a secret?” She cupped a hand to her mouth and whispered. “I dropped out.” She leaned back. “Don’t tell Sheldon.”

“If it makes you feel better I doubt it matters to him one way or the other if you graduated from community college,” Leonard said neutrally.

“Well I’d feel like an idiot if he found out. Here I am telling him to be honest with me and then I lie to him.” She sighed. “I wish I could go back and finish.”

“See? You want to go back so it’s not like you lied to Sheldon about finishing because your intention is still there to finish.”

Penny blinked before chuckling. “Wow. You are a b.s. machine!”

“I have an M.S to go with it,” he winked.

“You’re an awesome guy, Leonard,” she said whole-heartedly. “I’m lucky to have a friend like you.”

“Yeah,” he said dully albeit with a smile. “Friend.” Penny caught the tone.

“Leonard, you’re not a ‘fling’ kinda guy and it’s been too soon since Kurt,” she said seriously. “I mean I was with him for four years and—”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to explain.”

They both took a big sip of wine.

“I’m surprised you weren’t all after Missy like Howard and Raj,” she said.

“Well I do have a thing for a certain blonde neighbor across the hall.”

“Ah.”

“Besides, Missy’s too tall.” A little smile came to Leonard’s lips. “And perfect.” Penny laughed and swatted his arm.


Leonard stared at the beautiful blonde. He should have known that Penny would never be interested in him. He was short, near sighted, lactose intolerant. And yet she gave him a birthday party and went out on a date with him. She didn’t have to do those things but she did.

Not that it didn’t suck big time that she didn’t want to pursue anything with him but he knew as he took in her hopeful green eyes that she was kindness personified.

“But not your gay friend,” he amended with a smile. “Just putting that out there in case you ever exercise poor judgment.” Penny was amused.
“No offence but you’d have to dress better to be my gay friend,” she winked.

XxX

Penny was all ears while Leonard talked as she opened her apartment door.

“—And that’s why my mother named me ‘Leakey’—not because I had bed-wetting issues as a child,” he said adamantly.

Penny was shocked. “I can’t believe your mother wrote all about that.”

“Yeah, it was a real joy, especially when I was five and shaking people’s hands and sometimes I’d get a comment about how strong my handshake was and mother would say that must be because I was in the phallic stage of psychosexual development and continually holding my penis.” Penny couldn’t help but laugh.

“You poor thing,” she cooed and embraced him.

The door to 4A opened and Sheldon emerged with a laundry basket in hand.

“Oh, hey Sheldon,” Penny said brightly as she broke the hug. “Laundry time, huh?”

“It’s Saturday,” he said evenly. “I see you’ve concluded your date.”

“Yes,” Leonard replied.

“Was it successful?”

“We had a good time,” smiled Penny as she patted Leonard’s arm.

“I see.” Sheldon eyed Leonard. “As you’ll be off to satisfy her sexually I’ll say goodnight to you both now.” Penny’s mouth became a giant ‘O’ as he pressed the elevator button.

“We’re not having sex,” Leonard assured him.

Sheldon was confused. “But you said the date went well. And she gave you coffee.”

“It did go well,” Penny said slowly. “Leonard and I decided we’d be friends and that’s great news.” Pause. “And what’s with the coffee thing?”

“Nothing!” Leonard quickly interjected.

The hall was silent.

“Well, anyways, I had a great time,” Leonard gushed.

“Me too,” Penny said right back. They hugged and Penny flashed a smile at both men before closing her door.

More silence until the elevator doors opened. Sheldon cleared his throat and Leonard scurried to their apartment and dashed inside. The theoretical physicist stood a moment in thought before entering the elevator.

xTBBTx

Leonard ran his bow across the strings of his cello as he readied himself in his chair. He began slowly and mournfully Bach’s Prelude to his cello Suite Number Five in C Minor. As he played
he thought over the past week and in particular his date with Penny. He still felt kind of depressed that there wasn’t more between them but he counted his blessings that someone like Penny was interested in him, period. Besides, after the awkwardness at the restaurant they really did have a good time. He frowned slightly. Things did get a little awkward with Sheldon at the end, though. Beyond the coital comment there was something about how Sheldon stood there holding the laundry basket that made Leonard feel as if he was caught playing with his roommate’s possession. He knew that Sheldon was protective of Penny so that must have been what Leonard detected because if it was more than that it would mean Sheldon actually had—

Suddenly there was a loud but deep caterwaul emanating from Sheldon’s room.

“What the hell?” Leonard stopped playing and was quite overwhelmed by the droning that wasn’t a droning. All he knew was that it was annoying and that he’d pop out his own eardrums with a pencil if he had to hear much more of it.

“Sheldon!” he shouted. The sound stopped and a moment later Sheldon appeared in the living room.

“Yes?” he said.

“What the hell are you doing?” The lanky man clasped his hands behind his back.

“Well as you’ve unilaterally decided to play music at this point in time I had one of two options. One, I come out here and lodge a formal complaint under the Roommate Agreement or two, I join in.”

“By growling like a maniac?”

“Hardly. I was practicing my Tuvan throat singing.” Sheldon grasped his Adam’s apple and proceeded to make a grumbling, throaty sound.

“Stop!” Sheldon obliged. “I propose an amendment to the Roommate Agreement: no more Tuvan throat singing.”

“That’s an odd amendment.”

“We can file it as a counterproposal to no one whistling in the apartment.”

Sheldon thought about it.

“Alright,” he said at last. “As long as you no longer watch Babylon 5 in the living room.”

“What does Babylon 5 have to do with throat singing?” gasped Leonard.

“Whereas throat or overtone singing has been a source of entertainment and meditation for hundreds of years in Siberia Babylon 5 is J. Michael Straczynski’s gasping attempt at a space opera that is neither entertaining nor contemplative.”


“Excellent. I’ll draw up the addendum,” Sheldon said with a satisfied twitch of a smile. He made to go to his room but stopped in the hallway. “By the way, your cello playing is quite good.”

“Thank you.”
Sheldon went to his room. Leonard shook his head and returned to his sheet music to find where he’d stopped. He took a deep breath to calm himself and began to play. Note after note came out and with it the stress of the day as—

A strange sound as if someone was trying to tune in an old style radio came down the hall.

“Is that a theramin?” Leonard called out.

“Yes,” came the reply.

“Un-believable.” Obviously the experimental physicist would have to schedule in cello time into the Agreement. Still he wanted to play now so what was he to do?

He played the opening to Original Series Star Trek and paused. Sheldon responded with his theramin. Leonard smirked and played again. Again Sheldon played back. Both men then played with gusto as deep wood vibrations danced with electronic audio signals.

It wasn’t quite ebony and ivory but for them it worked.

xTBBTx

www.physicsforums.com: What exactly is fire?
“Now?” Sheldon asked his roommate with a strained smile on his face.

“Not yet,” murmured Leonard as he glared across the table at Raj. It took Leonard a lot of convincing to get Sheldon to skip on pizza night to come out to The Cheesecake Factory on a Thursday. Now that Raj had, after a sip or two of a grasshopper, turned into a complete douche he knew that Sheldon would never let him forget this night.

“That reminds me,” grinned Raj. “People magazine is having a reception this Saturday and I managed to get you invited. Of course I couldn’t get you into the VIP section because, well, you guys are just Ps while I’m a ‘People Person’. A Big PP,” he giggled and finished his drink.

“Tell me about it,” Howard said icily as Penny arrived at the table with another grasshopper.

“Grasshopper round two,” she said as she set it beside the astrophysicist. “Better pace yourself before the douche comes out.”

“Boy that warning came a little too late,” the engineer muttered.

“Penny, Penny,” Raj replied in a condescending tone. “Don’t worry your pretty head about me.”

“Oh, sure,” she said with a roll of the eyes.

“How quaint for a veritable untouchable to be concerned.” Raj took another drink.

“Now?” Sheldon said more forcefully to Leonard.

“Just about,” growled his roommate.

“So.” Raj clapped his hands once. “Saturday night. Can I count on my posse?” Leonard and Howard glanced at each other to make sure each was on the same page.

“We’d love to Raj but Leonard and I are working on a rocket this weekend,” Howard said in a voice that really didn’t sound apologetic at all. “Ma’s away so there won’t be the incessant noise of a jumbo jet engine rumbling through the house.”

“Oh.” Raj was disappointed. “Okay.” He turned to Sheldon. “So you and me buddy.”

“I can make it,” grinned Sheldon. “But I won’t.”

“Make it where?” asked Penny. “And what’s with the ridiculous smile?”

“I’m just pleased as punch that Raj has been arbitrarily selected by questionable people—”

“Sheldon, we rehearsed this,” muttered Leonard.

“Damn, this is hard.” Sheldon closed his mouth and gave a wide smirk although Penny could see by his eyes that he was far from amused.
“Penny, I’m off to a party for People magazine to celebrate my article on Saturday,” said Raj. “I realize it’s short notice but since you’re already ravishing it wouldn’t take you long to get ready.”

“I thought I was ‘untouchable’?” Penny said sarcastically.

“Only because your beauty is above my worth.”

Sheldon’s eyebrows narrowed in a frown. “Actually, to be ‘untouchable’ in India means—”

“But we’re not in India,” Raj reminded him quickly. “So,” he turned to Penny. “Would you do the honor of accompanying me? You’ll never know who you’ll meet in the VIP section.”

“You mean she gets to go to the VIP section but not us?” snapped Howard.

“Sure,” Penny agreed. She scribbled down her phone number on an order pad and gave it to Raj. “Call me tomorrow to make plans.” She went off to get their appetizers.

“I’ve got her num-ber,” Raj said in a teasing voice. “And a date.”

“It’s not a date,” countered Leonard. “She’s just going with you as a friend.”

“And maybe our friendship can be beneficial to each other.”

“You are being beneficial to each other: you’re providing Penny access to a social outing while she’s providing companionship,” said Sheldon. Howard rolled his eyes.

“Sheldon, ‘friends with benefits’ are people who have sex with each other without dating,” he said.

“Odd. That’s what her ex-boyfriend accused Penny and I of having.”

Raj laughed. “With your germ phobia? Now that’s funny. God, you might as well be untouchable.”

Immediately the East Texan dropped his smile.

“Now,” he growled and took up his jacket from the back of his chair and departed.

Leonard glared at Raj before following his roommate.

“Damn, they’re my ride,” said Howard as he, too, got up.

“But you rode your vespa here,” Raj replied, confused.

“Okay, then how about this: you’re a douche and I want to go home.”

“That makes more sense,” nodded the astrophysicist.

xTBBTx

Beep Beep Beep Beep

Leonard turned off the alarm and lay back in bed. Another night’s sleep disturbed by his roommate barging in, this time to remind him that mugs were to be washed, rinsed and set in the dish rack not left soaking away the remnants of hot cocoa in the sink. Now it was time to begin his day in the insane asylum that was Cooperville and have breakfast so he’d be ready to take a poop at seven thirty as agreed upon in the Roommate Agreement.
Now that he knew that Penny wasn’t into him there really wasn’t a reason for Leonard to stay although the apartment was nice and it was cool playing Rock Band with a bassist. Still, was Klingon Boggle until one am worth the strikes and harassment?

He put on his glasses and dragged himself out of bed, into his housecoat and slippers and trudged to the washroom to relieve himself. Leonard made sure he stood behind the tape Sheldon put on the floor in front of the toilet. He had no idea how the East Texan had determined at what distance the chance of urine backsplash diminished and frankly he didn’t want to know. As he washed his hands he realized there would always be mysteries in science and in this instance was content leaving it as such.

Leonard ventured down the hall to find Sheldon sitting on the couch eating his cereal and watching the weather network. On the counter was the shorter man’s mug from the night before. He picked it up, noted it was clean and dry and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Good morning, Leonard,” Sheldon said pleasantly. “I was thinking we could play Zork for Vintage Game Night.”

“That sounds good.” Leonard went to the refrigerator for his almond milk.

“Zork is quite distinguished in its genre in terms of both the quality of the text-based storytelling and the sophistication of its text parser which was not limited to simple verb-noun commands such as ‘hit troll’ but recognized some prepositions and conjunctions: ‘hit the troll with the Elvish sword’.”

“No kidding,” Leonard smirked before taking a sip of coffee.


For someone who insisted he liked his privacy Leonard noted that Sheldon spent an awful lot of time babbling on about one thing or another. The initial drive to work was silent as Sheldon didn’t like the radio but then the lanky man surprised Leonard the next morning when he produced a series of mind games to play. Then there were meals where Sheldon offered his, often unsolicited, opinion on every subject although to be fair his ideas were always interesting even if some were absolutely bat-crap crazy.

All Leonard had at his previous bachelor pad was silence.

Sheldon stood and brought his dishes to the sink and washed them.

“Don’t forget to bring an umbrella,” he said. “They’re calling for rain in the afternoon.”

Leonard nodded and Sheldon went to the washroom.

As the experimental physicist thought about his day he felt something while running a finger over the bottom of the mug. He raised it over his head and saw a simple label neatly centered across the bottom: Leonard’s mug.

There was a knock at the door he’d hoped would come and then it opened and Penny’s head popped in.

“Coffee?” she asked hopefully.

She came across the room in her brown slippers, Hello Kitty shorts and pink camisole holding out a large coffee mug. Leonard took it and went to pour her a cup.

“Something wrong with your mug?” she asked.

“Why?”

“You were looking at the bottom,” she said as she went to the refrigerator for Sheldon’s milk.

“Nope,” he said cheerfully. “Nothing wrong with it at all.”

“Good,” she said and took a swig of her coffee. “Ah,” she sighed before beaming at her companion. “Good morning, Leonard.”

“Good morning, Penny,” he grinned back.

The washroom door opened.

“Penny, you better not be using my milk,” Sheldon called.

“Why would I use your milk?” she asked before giving Leonard a wink.

“Don’t be innocent with me, missy. I know you’re the milk thief,” he twanged. “Leonard, is she using my milk?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” his roommate said.

“That’s a strike for the pair of you.” The washroom door closed.

Penny and Leonard chuckled before taking another swig of coffee. Again the label ran along his finger. ‘Leonard’s mug’. His eyes glanced around the living room taking in the books and action figures and white boards.

On the coffee table were two umbrellas.

With a smile Leonard realized he didn’t need a label to tell him he was home.

xTBBTx

Leonard sighed as he adjusted his plaid tie in the mirror. He had absolutely no inclination to go to Raj’s party but Penny had practically begged him so he couldn’t say no. Fortunately convincing Howard to accompany him wasn’t difficult; all Leonard had to say was that there’d be girls and booze there and the engineer quickly agreed to go.

Leonard could foresee a night of drunken rejection as People magazine readers weren’t the usual type to pick up scientists.

“No good can come of this,” he mumbled before turning out the light and exiting the washroom. He went into the living room to find Sheldon sitting on the couch with his laptop, bottled waters on the side table and Goldfish crackers to his right.

“You know, you really are a genius for staying home,” Leonard said.

“Leonard, I’d have to lose sixty I.Q. points to be a genius,” Sheldon retorted as he typed on his computer.

“You look pretty serious for comic message boarding tonight.”
“Actually, I’m playing Age of Conan. I realize it isn’t Tuesday but Larry had an invite to the Island of Tordage and as a group we couldn’t resist the challenge.”

“Wish I could be there too,” Leonard smirked. Sheldon raised an eyebrow.

“But you don’t play Age of Conan.”

“I know.” Leonard realized his roommate was still confused. “It’s just that I’d rather play Age of Conan with you than go to this stupid party.”

“Then why are you going?”

“Because Penny asked me.”

Sheldon snorted. “She asked me, too. I didn’t have a problem saying no.”

“But she doesn’t want to go alone,” countered Leonard.

“She’s with Raj and a host of other people. She’d hardly be alone.”

A knock at the door brought Leonard across the living room to answer it. His breath hitched as he took in Penny wearing a black cocktail dress with a short jacket. Her hair was tucked in a loose bun, making her neck a welcome distraction.


“Hey,” Penny said brightly as she stepped inside. “Are the guys here?”

“Not yet.” Leonard cleared his throat. “You look great.”

“Thanks,” she replied. “You look—good.” She felt the lapel of his burgundy suit. “I didn’t know they still made corduroy suits.”

“I’m not sure. This one’s from grade eight.”

“Seriously?” she chuckled.

“My last growth spurt,” he sniffed.

“Huh.” Penny turned to his roommate. “Last chance to come with us, Sheldon.”

“I’d rather have Wolverine give me a prostate exam,” he replied distractedly as he continued to work on his laptop.

“Take that as a definite ‘no’,” Leonard interpreted. “Besides, he’s clearly built a nest.” Penny looked curious. “See the snacks? All are within easy reach. Based on the number of bottled waters he’s in for the long haul.”

“I’ll show you a long haul,” teased Howard as he stepped up beside Penny on the mat. “Might I say you look positively ravishing this evening?”

“Why thank you, Howard,” Penny replied, amazed that he was civil.

“Of course it’d be cooler if you wore something a little tighter since your butt has a jiggle that jam don’t have.”
Penny turned to him and narrowed her eyes. “You blew it, kiddo.”
“Too much, huh?”

Sheldon turned towards the trio.

“Could you wait in the hall?” he asked evenly. “My game will commence shortly and I find your conversation irritating.”

Leonard frowned. “Sheldon, that’s not nice.”

“I’m sorry.” Sheldon smiled widely. “I’d appreciate it if you continued your salutations in the hall so I can prepare for battle.”

“Battle?” asked Penny.

“Age of Conan,” Leonard explained.

“Conan?”

Sheldon was incredulous. “Really Penny?” He shook his head disgustedly and went back to typing.

“Ooo bay-be, let’s get the par-tay started,” sang Raj as the elevator opened and he stepped out.

“Looks like M. Night Charmalarmalon has arrived,” smirked Howard.

“Hello there, good people,” Raj said with a goofy grin before taking a sip of champagne. “That’s what you’re wearing?” he asked as he looked over his friends.

“Yes,” Leonard said crisply.

“Ah well, I suppose that’s the difference between ‘P’ and ‘PP’,” he sighed. He handed Penny the other glass of champagne. “For you my dear.”

“This sounds more like ca-ca,” muttered the engineer to Leonard.

“Where’d you get the champagne?” asked Penny before taking a sip.

“People magazine sent me a limo. A limo!” Raj gave a final salute before downing his glass.

“And the Douche Two Thousand is ready for liftoff,” murmured Leonard.

“Oh I think that flight left a long time ago,” Penny replied. “Come on Raj, let’s get you to the party before you fall on your face.”

“Our chariot awaits,” the astrophysicist said. He looked down his nose at Howard and Leonard. “We’ll see you there.”

“You mean we’re not going with you?” snapped Leonard.

“Leonard,” tsked Raj derisively. “It’s a VIP limo and Penny and I are ‘PPs’ while you’re—”

“We all go or you go by yourself,” Penny said firmly. Raj’s smirk faltered under her intense glare and he acquiesced with a little nod. Penny took two steps to the elevator before turning around. “And any snide comments and it’s Junior Rodeo on.” She waved her finger at the group although her eyes were on Howard and then Raj before stepping into the elevator.
“She’s feisty,” noted Raj who then pumpkin grinned. “I like that.”

Leonard scowled at his friend as he closed the apartment door.

“Finally,” sighed Sheldon. He put on his headset and logged into his game. “Fellow warriors, this is Sheldor the Conqueror. Prepare to enter Axel’s fortress in five minutes.”

XxX

“Hey there,” grinned a tall man with a blonde ponytail and Armani jacket as he took in Penny.

“Hi,” she replied amiably.

“Well you’ve got meat on your bones so you’re not a model. At the same time you’re friendly so you can’t be from L.A.” He cocked his head in thought. “Chicago?”

“Nope. Nebraska born and bred. I’m Penny.” She stuck out her hand.

“Alex,” he replied as they shook hands. “So are you one of the ‘Thirty Under Thirty’?”

“Oh God no. Just a plain ol’ actress here although if it counts I’m friends with two physicists.”

Alex was impressed. “Oh really? They ever bore you with their work?”

“Leonard mentioned that he worked with lasers while Dr. C. is a theoretical physicist. They both work at Cal Tech.”

“Cool.” He smiled, amused. “I love listening to guys babble about science stuff. They go on and on but their enthusiasm is infectious.”

“Or talk to infinity about comic books or how they use physics to kick your ass at putt-putt.” They both laughed.

“How did that go about?”

“Well Dr. C. and I went out golfing and he was making impossible shots left and right like when he used centrifugal force to counteract gravitational forces on the ball when it took the loop-de-loop.”

“Who’s Dr. C.?”

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper. He’s kinda”—here she smiled—“hard to describe. I mean how do you explain someone who makes glow-in-the-dark goldfish and experiments with making perfect scrambled eggs? Oh, by the way, after exhaustive research he’s concluded they’re as good as they’re gonna be.”

“That’s good to know. Listen, I’d love to hear more about you and the mysterious ‘Dr. C’,” he said as he pulled out his phone. “My husband’s a producer and I’ve got an idea I’ve been itching to try so I’ve been collecting cool scientists.” Alex smiled broadly. “You, my dear, are a bonus and a half. So, mind if I get your number? I swear I won’t spontaneously turn hetero on you.”

Penny laughed and the pair exchanged numbers.

“So is Dr. C. here?” he asked hopefully.

“No he’s at home playing Conan. He’s not the—”
“Penny!” came a slurred East Indian voice. Raj came up beside her and put an arm around her waist. “I see you’ve met my squeeze,” he grinned to Alex.

“I’m not your squeeze,” Penny said before turning to Alex. “There’s no squeezing here.”

“Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali,” the astrophysicist said. “I found a planetary object and now I’m a star. Get it?” Penny rolled her eyes.

“And on that note let’s go see if they serve coffee here,” she tsked. “Nice meeting you, Alex.”

“You sure you’ve got him?” Alex asked.

“Oh she’s got me alright,” Raj said before turning to Penny with a naughty grin. “Now what are you going to do with me?”

“You mean besides showing everyone how to hogtie and castrate someone in under sixty seconds?” she smiled sweetly although her eyes were emerald hard.

Raj gulped and Penny gave a wink to Alex before walking off with the astrophysicist.

“Sassy and sexy,” smirked Alex as he watched them go. “Alex, you’ve struck gold.”

XxX

“What a frakken night,” Penny sighed as she stepped out of the elevator onto her floor. She’d ended up taking a very drunk Raj back to his place which he interpreted as a sign for them to ‘suck face’. Fortunately for Raj his parents Skype called before she could kill him.

Why was it that every guy she met just wanted to get into her pants? Sure, she was good looking but there were other good looking women out there that had friendships with men. Immediately Penny thought about Alex.

“Well, gay men at any rate,” she chuckled. Her mind flitted to a lanky body covered in mud and sweat and camouflage. “Okay there’s one—”

“Yee haw!” came a shout from apartment 4A.

Never had she heard Sheldon so excited. Curious, Penny went to his door and tried the handle. It turned and she stuck her head in to see him on the couch intently playing his game.

“Now the left!” he called into his headset. “Jovin use the wand of lightning. They’re vulnerable to electricity!”

Penny slipped out of her shoes and sprayed her feet before closing the door. She padded her way to the couch and sat down.

“Barry, take out the golem at the top of the stairs! …Yes, yes, acid bolts will do!”

Sheldon was flushed as he clicked furiously on his laptop controls. The tendons in his forearms were prominent and Penny realized that, while he wasn’t built like Kurt, Sheldon did have some meat on his lanky body.

“Good Lord who cast the fireball? Think people think! Iron golems speed up with heat!”

His cheek muscles twitched as he concentrated on his actions. Penny leaned over to see a flurry of action on the screen with various warriors in combat against automaton beings with swords.
Minutes ticked by and Sheldon continued to bark orders into his headset. His voice was so sure and strong that combined with his Sherlock Holmes stare Penny thought Sheldon Cooper could be a force if he ever got pissed.

Creature after creature dropped to the ground until only Sheldon’s party remained standing.

“Congratulations gentlemen—and Red Alicia—our objective has been obtained. Rest and heal. Those who are healthy search and secure the chamber.” Sheldon did a couple more clicks. “Sheldor is AFK.” He took off his headset and sat back with a contented sigh.

“Did you win your game?” asked Penny.

“You don’t ‘win’ Age of Conan. It’s an online multiplayer role playing game set in Robert E. Howard’s classic universe. As a participant my avatar, Sheldor the Conqueror, completes quests that reward him with experience and treasure.”

“Oh, okay. So you finished your quest?”

“We successfully conquered Axel’s fortress,” he said with a satisfied smirk as he closed his eyes and rested.

Penny raised an eyebrow. “‘We’?”

“My companions,” he said as he patted the laptop with his fingertips.

“That’s cool,” she smiled warmly. “Actually it’s nice to know you have your online buddies. I was worried you were all by yourself in here.”

Sheldon sat up and placed his laptop on the coffee table.

“For your information I have two hundred and twelve friends on My Space,” he sniffed.

“You meet any of them?”

“No. That’s the beauty of them.” He drained the rest of his bottled water. “They don’t track germs into the apartment or bore me to tears with incessant mind-numbing conversation or—”

Penny was hurt.

“Sorry I’m not interesting enough,” she said brusquely.

“I was referring to Leonard.”

“Oh,” Penny blushed.

Sheldon narrowed his eyes. “Although you do steal my milk.”

“Hearsay.”

Sheldon leaned forward and opened a window on his laptop and quickly accessed his videos.

“I’d assumed there’d be denial hence the reason why I set up the milkcam.”

Penny’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?” she gasped even as Sheldon moved the laptop so she could see her morning self reach into the refrigerator for Sheldon’s milk and pour some into her coffee mug.
“Game, set, match, milk thief,” he said with a tone of satisfaction.

Penny shook her head with a smile on her face. “Okay you got me. Next time you’re buying milk it’s on me.”

“Like how you bought Leonard coffee to replace what you’ve been drinking.” Sheldon got up and gathered his empty water bottles.

“Exactly.”

“Even though he said it wasn’t necessary since he enjoyed your company.”

“Yeah, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

Sheldon snorted as he stopped what he was doing to stare at his companion.

“If principles were involved you wouldn’t have stolen my milk to begin with.”

“Yeah, yeah,” chuckled Penny.

The physicist tossed the bottles in the recycling box and put a ‘chip clip’ on the Goldfish cracker bag before putting it in the cupboard.

“Well, it wouldn’t be fair to ask for a full carton of milk since you haven’t stolen that much. Moreover, having you give me an excess amount of milk would only encourage the thefts to continue since in your lactose-crazed mind you’d think I’d ‘owe you’.”

“You wouldn’t owe me, Sheldon.”

He pulled out a bottle of sanitizer and cleaned his hands.

“So you’d quit stealing my milk?”

Penny made a face. “I don’t really like almond milk.”

“And we lack the refrigerator space for an additional carton of milk,” added Sheldon.

“I know!” Penny said brightly. “I could always leave a quarter each time I take some of your milk. You can be my ‘Milk Fairy’.”

“Hardly, although the idea isn’t without merit.” He cocked his head in thought. “I’ll need to know how much milk you take in your coffee.”

“I dunno. Until it gets to the color of cloud I like.”

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest as he stood by his whiteboard. “But if you don’t measure how can you ensure quality and consistency?”

“There you go again with the science, Dr. C,” she chuckled. “Oh, speaking of which I met a guy who’s interested in you.”

“Is he a Nobel Prize laureate or involved in the comic book industry?”

“Probably not.”

“Then I doubt I’d want to meet him,” he sniffed.
Penny tried again. “Well his husband’s a producer so maybe they do that Star Trek show you like.” Sheldon shook his head derisively.

“Penny, Star Trek aired between nineteen sixty six and nineteen sixty nine.”

“But I do get points for knowing you watch it,” she said with a slight smile.

He gave a half nod. “You do.”

“Thanks for making a crappy night end on a good note, Sheldon,” she said warmly.

“You’re welcome,” he replied evenly.

A sound of a trumpet blast came over his headset.

“My comrades are ready for our next quest,” he said as he made for the couch.

“Ah, well good luck,” she said as she got up.

Sheldon sat and positioned his computer on his lap before putting on his headset.

“Sheldor is back online. Commence to the Temple of Mitha.” He frowned. “Fine, but you really should have gone while we were on break. Quest resumes in five.” Sheldon clicked on a series of stats before realizing Penny was still in the room. “AFK. Is there something you need?” he asked her.

“No really.”

“Alright.” He clicked a tab. “Sheldor is back online.”

Penny took up her shoes and vacated to her apartment. She stripped out of her clothes, washed the makeup from her face before stepping into the shower. Her hands ran through her hair as she lathered the shampoo, the excess foam running down her arm and onto the tub floor. She smiled at the white foam as it immediately brought to mind Sheldon’s milk.

“Milk thief,” she giggled. Next time she was in his refrigerator she’d have to look for that stupid camera.

After she was clean she slipped on her comfy pajamas and brown slipper boots and padded to the living room. She settled on her couch but didn’t feel like watching television and she wasn’t quite ready for bed. A smirk came to her face as she thought about Raj at home in a drunken sleep. Normally that would have been her after attending an event with an open bar. At the very least she would have picked someone up but the only one who seemed interested in Penny for Penny was Alex and he was off the market in more ways than one. It had been six months since she’d broken up with Kurt and several weeks since she’d had sex with anyone. As much as Penny liked to see herself as independent she realized that she missed having a man in her life. That wasn’t quite right. Leonard had offered and even though he was sweet in a geeky kind of way she turned him down because she wasn’t ready. Or interested if the truth be told. She just wanted a masculine presence. Again a thought of Sheldon in his paintball gear came to mind.

“Well I don’t have a man but at least I have a whackadoodle,” she chuckled.

Penny grabbed her keys and returned to 4A. She sprayed the bottoms of her slippers but defiantly decided to keep them on and returned to her spot on the couch.

“Mind if I stay for a bit?” she asked. “You can keep playing,” she added.
“As long as you’re quiet,” Sheldon said without looking away from the computer screen. “Alright, step one is to scout out and report. Team ‘A’ go left. Team ‘B’, right. Barry, you’ve got the invisible cloak so see if you can bypass the guards and do something about the main gate.”

Penny scooted closer to see the screen. On it was a dark haired warrior, well toned but not overly muscular, wearing leather armor and carrying a double edged sword with a white glow to the blade.

“He’s cute,” she said.


The barbarian seemed to be impatient and occasionally swung his sword in anticipation. Each swing exposed gaps in his armor where Penny could see bits of his muscled body.

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Me. Now quiet. … Barry, report.”

Normally Penny wasn’t into the whole fantasy wardrobe stuff but perhaps she just wasn’t exposed to enough of it. She giggled. Or else she really was hard up for a man.

“Sheldor AFK.” He turned to her. “Penny—”

“I know. Zip it. Sorry.”

He narrowed his eyes. “No you’re not.”

“Is that the gate opening?” She pointed to the screen.

“What?” he growled as he turned to the computer. “Barry, I said scout and report not act!”

Penny tucked her legs beside her and snuggled into the couch to watch the chaos unfold.

XxX

Leonard was all smiles as he stepped out of the elevator. Howard and he had spent a good part of the evening chatting with a couple of scientists. Eloise and Claire might have been in their fifties and married but at least they were women so Leonard considered the evening a partial success.

He tested the apartment door and it was open so he entered to find Sheldon and Penny sitting side by side on the couch.

“Switch from the dagger to the enchanted sword!” Sheldon hissed. “It’s the only way to defeat the guard captain.”

“I’m switching, I’m switching.” Penny growled as she clicked furiously on the laptop. Her female barbarian clashed swords with the guard captain. “Squeeze me will ya? Hack! Hack! Expect sex ya say? Ha!” Sheldon turned his head to stare curiously at his companion as Penny slashed at her opponent. “Show me your ‘Indian snake charm’? Whatever.” There was a flurry more of activity and then the guard captain fell dead to the ground.

“Excellent,” said Sheldon. “Now click on the enchanted boots.” She did. “Congratulations, you are now a level three warrior.”

“Yes!” she grinned.
“Now we’ll—wait! Don’t go there!”

“Shit! Sheldon, what the hell’s that?” Penny’s avatar ran down the corridor followed by a large dog with red eyes and flames shooting out of its mouth.

“Hellhound! Retreat!”

Leonard smirked as he walked behind the couch to the hall and to his bedroom.

xTBBTx

“Boy, you don’t look so good,” Leonard said to Raj as the astrophysicist sat at the lunch table. “Hang overs are a bitch, huh?”

“Tell me about it,” groaned Raj as he opened his can of ginger ale and stirred it with a straw to help it flatten. “So how was your night?” Leonard and Howard glanced at each other.

“We scored some babes,” said Howard neutrally. “Showed them a good time.”

“Well I had a good time too,” sniffed Raj. At least as far as I can remember. “Penny and I were the belles of the ball.”

“Speaking of Penny you owe her an apology,” Sheldon said.

“For what?”

“Making unwanted sexual advances. Inviting her to see your ‘Indian snake charm’.”

“I said that?” gasped Raj.

“Told you to pace yourself,” Leonard tsked. “One drink too many and you sound like Howard.”

“I resent that,” the engineer mock-sniffed.

“How am I supposed to apologize to Penny when I can’t talk to her sober?” asked Raj.

“You can always write her a note,” offered Leonard. “Whatever you do don’t just text her.”

“What do I say?”

“Sorry I was a colossal douche’ for starters,” said Howard.

“Your conduct was out of line regarding your unwanted touching, suggestive innuendoes and overall boorish behavior,” Sheldon said crisply. “Penny accompanied you so you wouldn’t be alone on your celebratory evening and she deserved better.” He began counting his napkins. “As her friend I won’t tolerate any further mistreatment.”

“But Howard does it all the time,” countered Raj.

“There’s a difference: Howard’s like that with everyone. Secondly, he’s never put a hand on Penny,” Sheldon’s eyes were hard. “I doubt Penny would put up with such behavior and rest assured I won’t.” His brow furrowed. “Drat, I’m a napkin short.” The lanky man got up from the table and went to the condiment counter.

Howard’s eyes were wide as he looked incredulously at Leonard.

“Did I just hear a ‘leave my woman alone or I’ll break you’?” he asked.
The experimental physicist shrugged. “If it was anyone else on the planet I’d say yes. With Sheldon, who knows?”

Sheldon fished his keys from his jacket pocket and unlocked the apartment door. He stepped in and immediately froze in place as he saw Leonard and Leslie Winkle making out on the couch.

“What’s *she* doing here?” he growled.

“Hello dumbass,” Leslie replied as she sat back and straightened her top.

Leonard smiled sheepishly at the unimpressed look on his roommate’s face.

“Leslie and I made up. Great huh?”

“This is the reason why you couldn’t pick me up at the university? You needed to ‘suck face’?” scowled Sheldon.

“Better than watching you in your office sucking at your research,” mocked Leslie.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Yes, well…” He turned to Leonard. “I’m invoking the Hostile Alien clause of the Roommate Agreement.”

“Leslie isn’t an alien trying to impregnate me with her egg,” Leonard said with a roll of the eyes.

“Well I needed twenty four hours notice before you could have a woman in the apartment here for the purposes of coitus.”

“We’re not having coitus, we’re just making out,” amended the shorter man.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Sheldon asked, irritated. “Cook my meal wearing noise canceling headphones and then spend the rest of the evening in my bedroom?”

“It’s just one night,” sighed Leonard. “I’ll be at Leslie’s tomorrow so you can—”

Sheldon’s jaw dropped. “But tomorrow’s the sale at Lee’s Hobby and Trains. Who’ll take me to the store?”

“I doubt Penny would mind.”

“Ooo Penny,” teased Leslie. “Did dumbass assemble a girlfriend?”

“Penny is a girl and a friend but not my ‘girlfriend’,” snapped Sheldon.

“She’s our neighbor,” explained Leonard. “Hey, why don’t you go ask her now?”

“Because I’m tired and hungry and want to be in my apartment.”

“By all means you may,” said Leslie with a half smile before grabbing Leonard at the back of his head and pulling him in for a kiss.

The East Texan exited the apartment and firmly closed the door behind him before stomping over to 4B.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

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

“The mean lady’s in my apartment,” he growled.

“What mean lady is this?”

“Leonard’s booty call.”

Penny grinned. “Good for him.”

“Good for—Penny, I’m tired, hungry and homeless.”

She held the door open. “Come in and rest your weary bones, Tex.”

“Thank you.” He stepped inside and looked around the apartment. “I see you’ve managed to partially contain your clutter.”

“Hey, it’s not like I raid my laundry hamper and spread dirty clothes around the room as soon as you’re gone,” Penny chuckled as she shut the door and ventured to the kitchen. “Have a seat and I’ll see what I can rustle up.”

“No need. It’s pizza night. I’ll just order it,” he replied as he pulled out his phone and dialed. “Hello, this is Dr. Sheldon Cooper. I’d like a pizza for delivery. …2311 North Los Robles Avenue, apartment 4B. … Yes that’s correct. … I’ll have a medium with sausage, light olives and mushrooms. … Yes. … Thank you.” He hung up and tucked the phone in his pocket before checking his watch.

“You gonna stand by the door all night or are you gonna come in?” Penny asked with a smirk.

“I suppose,” he said and began to wander about the apartment scrutinizing the furniture.

“What are you doing?”

“You don’t expect me to just sit willy-nilly do you?”

She closed her eyes even as she smirked. “Knock yourself out, Sheldon. Want something to drink while you scour the countryside?”

“I’m upset so a hot beverage would be appropriate,” he said as he sat on the wooden chair before quickly popping off. “Do you have herbal tea?”

“Honey lemon.”

“That’s acceptable.” He walked to the counter and tried a stool but it was caught in the air flow and so he got off.

“You know Leonard’s lady?” Penny asked as she prepared the coffee mugs with tea bags.

“Leslie Winkle. She’s a sub-par physicist at the university. She was on the opposing team at the Physics Bowl.” Sheldon sat in the red swivel chair and, after a moment to decide, smiled. “This will be my seat from now on.”

“Glad that’s decided. Now I can sleep tonight.”
Sheldon glared before clearing his throat. “Now on to more pressing business. Since Leonard’s occupied tomorrow I require you to drive me to the train store.”

“Sorry sweetie, I’m working the afternoon shift,” Penny replied. “You’ll have to ask Raj or Howard.”

“Howard rides a vespa and Raj has a video-conference with the Hawaii Observatory so he won’t be available. As it is he’ll miss the first hour of vintage game night.” Sheldon sighed. “Now with Leonard gone I suppose it’ll just be Howard and me; although my having to take transit to the train store will eat up my free time so perhaps I should cancel the night altogether.”

“Why don’t you get a car?” Penny asked as she took the kettle and poured hot water into their mugs. “I mean you can drive, right?”

“I choose not to,” Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth.

“It’ll make you more independent.” She walked over and handed him his mug. “What about driving didn’t you like?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

“Really?” Penny put a plate on the coffee table and sat down on the couch. “Not even a learner’s permit?”

“From various video games I’ve gathered enough evidence that driving isn’t for me.” He picked up the tea bag string and dunked the bag up and down in the cup. “Obviously I’m too evolved to drive.”

“I’m not even gonna ask,” Penny snickered. “But hey, there are driving simulators out there. We used one when I was enrolled in Young Drivers.” She set down her mug and flipped open her laptop. “Let’s see if we can find one.”

“It’s not necessary,” Sheldon said quickly as he took out his tea bag and set it on the plate.

“Sure it is. You’ve gotta learn and besides you like video games.” Here she smiled. “Just pretend you’re playing on the X-Box and you’ll be fine.”

“Oh yes, under your guidance I’m sure to prevail,” he twanged. “What lesson is ‘service the check engine light?’”

Penny narrowed her eyes. “Sheldon, we’ve got a half hour until your pizza comes.”

“We can always watch television.”

She shrugged. “Well America’s Next Top Model is on so I suppose we could—”

“Of course I’m sure there’s a simulator or two out there we could peruse,” he said quickly. “Pass me the laptop and I’ll get you on our wifi.”

“Don’t worry I’ve got the password,” she said brightly as she typed away.

“Penny, I change the password weekly.”

“I know.” She clicked on her Internet Explorer and it went to her Google homepage. “When it didn’t work I just asked Leonard and—”
“He told you again?”

“It’s not like I’m online all the time. I’m only there updating my Facebook account and checking emails.” She smiled sheepishly. “And maybe flipping through Lolcats.”

“First my milk and now my wifi,” he scowled. “Obviously some amendments are needed for our Friendship Agreement as you don’t have a grasp on the concept of other people’s property not belonging to you.”

“Sheldon, it’s not like I can steal the internet.”

“You’re stealing bandwidth.”

“Leonard said I could.”

Sheldon shook his head. “It all returns to Leonard.” He stared accusingly at Penny. “This was your idea having him for a roommate.”

“You get rides to work and share on the bills and have someone to play Halo with so it’s not all bad,” she countered.

“Point. But still I expect things to function in a logical order.”

“You mean you expect things to go your way,” she giggled, garnering a glare. “Unfortunately chum if you want life to be ‘my way or the highway’ you’ve gotta know how to drive because sometimes it’ll have to be your butt on the road. Case in point being tonight.”

“I suppose,” he said grudgingly. “Although for the record I’m not happy about this.”

“Noted.” She smiled. “Oh, here’s a driving game demo. It’s just one course but you can start here.”

“I’d rather not,” he said hesitatingly. “My tea will get cold and the pizza will arrive soon and—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” She moved the plate and slid the laptop over to him. “It’ll only take about five minutes to run the laps so it’s no biggie. Besides, it’ll give ya something to do while I fix dinner.”

With a sour expression on his face Sheldon picked up the pink laptop and set it on his lap. He read over the instructions and, after taking a deep breath to calm himself, began the simulator.

“See?” Penny said encouragingly. “Easy peas—” There was a sound of a car crashing.

“No big deal. Just gotta get used to—” Another crash. She got up and went behind Sheldon so she could see what was going on. “Wow, okay, easy there—” Crash! “Not so hard! You’ll—” Smash! “Okay now move a little to the—Oh my God!” There was a horrendous squeal of tires and then a crash that made both Penny and Sheldon jump.

“Well, at least you missed the old lady,” she said diplomatically.

“Not so much the light pole,” he grumbled.

“Well start again. You know what they say: practice makes per—” Her eyes widened as Sheldon swerved in front of a transport.

CRASH!

Silence.
“Of course taking the bus is cheaper than a car,” Penny said quietly.

Sheldon nodded and closed the laptop.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Zork
The Mary Jane Intervention


Leonard glanced at Sheldon as the latter opened the door to the lobby.

“I can’t believe you have a…whatever this is,” he said.

“I wish you’d be more noun-specific. It’s irritating,” Sheldon replied as the men entered the building.

Just then the elevator opened and Penny emerged.

“Hey guys,” she said amiably.

“Hi Penny.” Leonard stopped to talk with his neighbor as Sheldon went to the mail box. “Where are you off to?”

“Apparently my cheque didn’t clear so I have to make the car payment in person.”

“While you’re there you might wish to inquire about your engine,” Sheldon said in passing as he flipped through the mail.

“Anyways,” she said pointedly after a quick glare in Sheldon’s direction. “I’m off.” Penny went to the door before abruptly turning around. “Oh, yeah, it’s Monday. Could you order a pad thai for me? I didn’t make it out for groceries.”

“I’ll let Ramona know,” said Sheldon as he pulled out his phone.

“Ramona?” asked Penny.

“A graduate student I met today. An intelligent labradoodle. She suggested we get together for a meal and discuss my work.”

Penny was shocked. “So it’s a date?”

“There is no expectation of coitus,” explained Sheldon. “It’s only a man and woman getting to know each other over dinner.” Penny looked at Leonard who simply shrugged. “Now do you want a small or standard order pad thai?”

“Forget the pad thai,” Penny said quickly. “I, uh, just remembered there’s a Subway near the dealership.”

“Alright.” Sheldon stepped into the elevator followed by Leonard.

“Have fun,” she said.

“We’ll be discussing my work. How could I not?”

The doors closed and Penny was alone in the lobby.

xTBBTx
“Not again,” moaned Leonard as Raj, Howard and he rounded the corner in the cafeteria to see Sheldon working furiously away at his research while Ramona was arranging the food on his platter in the order of consumption.

“And so returns the red-haired goddess,” gushed Howard. Leonard snorted.

“Yeah well you can have her,” he said. “She’s been at the apartment Wednesday and Thursday and I’ve got a bad feeling I’ll be seeing her tonight.”

“Well it’s polite that we see her now,” Howard prompted. “Besides, Sheldon likes routine and it’s customary that we eat together.”

The three scientists made their way to the lunch table.

“Hey, Sheldon,” Howard said amiably. In response he was greeted by a scowl from Ramona.

“Dr. Cooper is working,” she scolded.

“But it’s lunch time,” Leonard replied. “He’s got to take time to eat.”

“And he is,” she sniffed. “By standing in line for him I’ve saved twenty minutes a day which he can direct towards research.” Here she furrowed her brow. “But you’re right; he has to eat so he can’t be distracted by inane conversation. If you’re going to stay you have to be quiet.”

The three men looked at each other before moving off to another table.

“So how long do you think this is going to last?” asked Raj.

“Hopefully not long. Sheldon’s already missed Halo night and movie night as it is. Without a routine I'm afraid he'll go positively bat crap crazy. Not like I’d have an idea what it’d be like living with a crazy roommate,” said Leonard with a roll of the eyes.

“Nothing’s an absolute,” Howard reminded him. “There’s really no limit to how crazy Sheldon could get.”

Ramona giggled and the group turned to see Sheldon playfully thrust a fork in her direction.

“Who’d imagine Sheldon Cooper would have a girlfriend?” said Raj.

“Especially since he’d been immune to Penny,” mused Howard. “Of course, Penny offers more of the boom-shaka-lacka-boom-boom while Sheldon lacks a deal.”

More giggling drifted over from Sheldon’s table.

“He might not be playing with a full deck but believe me he’s dealing,” Raj amended.

Leonard shook his head before biting into his sandwich.

XxX

Penny glanced at the split screen and grinned widely.

“Sheldon, it’s not Halo. Quit hiding behind the tree,” she said.

“I’m not hiding, I’m stuck,” he growled in reply as he did his best to reverse the car. A final spin of the tires and Mario was back on the raceway.
“Who knew he’d have problems steering around inanimate objects?” smiled Leonard as he looked over his book to see the carnage on the screen. “You’re doing pretty well, Penny.”

“The steering wheel’s kinda fun to use,” she replied. “I mean it makes it easier than driving on a laptop.” She turned her head to Sheldon and winked.

“Amusing, I think not,” he said through pursed lips.

Penny made the last turn and her car crossed the finish line.

“And the winn-ah, Penny the Penguin!” she cheered. “Wanna go again?” Sheldon checked his watch.

“As much ‘fun’ as this has been Ramona’s coming over.”

“Ah.”

“What he means is that he has to put away the game system before she sees he’s actually enjoying himself,” Leonard interpreted, garnering a glare from his roommate.

“I’m getting a lot accomplished,” Sheldon said crisply as he turned off the game box and proceeded to wind the controller cord around the wheel.

“Well, I better skedaddle,” Penny said as she got up from the computer chair. “I’ll see you around.”

There was a knock at the door and Sheldon grabbed the controller from Penny and practically threw it into the box before darting to the couch and putting his laptop on his thighs. Leonard rolled his eyes and put a bookmark in his book before getting up and proceeding to the door.

“Hello, Dr. Hofstadter,” Ramona said before stepping inside. She set the bag of Chinese food on the side shelf so she could slip off her shoes and spray her feet. “Hello, Dr. Cooper.”

“Shh, working,” Sheldon mumbled. Penny could see the twitch on his face as he did his best to concentrate on the computer screen.

“Oops, sorry.” Ramona padded to the kitchen and set the food on the counter. “Well, we’d best nourish your body to feed the mind. Of course I didn’t bring enough for anyone else since I *thought* we’d be alone.”

“Just leaving,” Leonard said as he slipped into his shoes. He grabbed his keys and Penny followed him out the door.

“Wow, she’s intense,” Penny said. “So what do they do all night?”

“Either Sheldon works on his projects or else they talk about physics.” Here Leonard chuckled. “If this keeps up I’ll have to invoke the live-in girlfriend clause of the Roommate Agreement.” He caught a strange look on Penny’s face. “I mean, if he was interested in her. Which he’s not. Well, I don’t think he is.”

“This is good for him,” Penny said thoughtfully. “Good. For. Sheldon.” She gave her neighbor a stiff smile. “See ya later.”

“Goodnight Penny,” he replied as she entered her apartment.
stairs. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

“Hello Raj? She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed ordered me out of the apartment. … Okay, be there soon.” He hung up and then chuckled to himself. “If I spend any more time at Raj’s I might as well be his live-in girlfriend.”

xTBBT

*Oh no….* Penny inwardly sighed as she saw Sheldon and Ramona waiting for the elevator as she entered the lobby.

“…How can the holomorphic data W and f be computed exactly for type II backgrounds from the underlying 2d theory on the stringworld-sheet?” asked Ramona.

Sheldon tutted. “Obviously the result would include an in general infinite series of stanton corrections. In particular, the world-sheet instanton corrections to the effective action often describe the effect of genuine space-time instantons in the four-dimensional theory. The reason is —” Over Ramona’s shoulder he noted Penny about to ascend the stairs. “Penny?” The waitress stopped and turned towards him. “You didn’t check your mail.”

“I’ll do it later,” she replied and put her foot on the first step.

“But you always check your mail when you come in from work,” he persisted. “Suppose you have something time-sensitive?”

“Maybe I have to go to the washroom so I don’t have time,” she snapped. Sheldon raised an eyebrow.

“Then why are you taking the stairs?”

Penny sighed and stepped over to the couple.

“So you’re Ramona,” she said with mock cheer. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Funny, I haven’t heard a thing about you,” the red-headed graduate student said crisply. Both women turned to Sheldon.

“Elevator’s here,” he said with a twitchy mouth and stepped inside. The two women followed and he pressed the floor button.

“I read the draft of your latest paper,” Ramona breathed. “The idea that you might be able to incorporate gravity with mirror-symmetry, I have to tell you I found it physically exhilarating.”

Penny rolled her eyes.

“Yes, the non-perturbative superpotentials for the Cooper theory coupled to gravity break supersymmetry dynamically, in accordance with a previous paper where I discussed supersymmetry breaking by gaugino condensation,” Sheldon replied.

As the elevator rose Penny took in his words, most of which she didn’t understand but that wasn’t the point. It was his authority that had that wowed her. Gone was the Sheldon who knocked on her door in threes and obsessively cleaned his hands. In his place was Dr. Sheldon Cooper and he was—intimidating.

The doors opened at their floor and the Nebraskan all but flew out of the elevator and to her door.
“Penny?” She turned to the blue of Sheldon’s eyes. “Will you be eating with us tonight?” She caught Ramona’s glare.

“No. Have a good one.” Penny opened her door and darted inside, leaving her neighbor to stare at her door.

“Dr. Cooper?” asked Ramona. “We’d best order now so you don’t experience digestive distress.”

He nodded slowly. “Of course.”

A moment later they stepped into his apartment.

XxX

Leonard woke up and reached over for his glasses before slipping out of bed. He went to the washroom and then proceeded to the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Leonard?” came Sheldon’s voice from the couch. In response the shorter man nearly dropped his drink.

“Why are you sitting here in the dark?” he gasped.

“I couldn’t sleep. At first I thought it was something physiological in nature but my temperature and blood pressure are normal. My bowels evacuated on time and my stool consistency was—”

“Tut-tut-tut-tut! Don’t need to go there, Sheldon.”

Silence.

“Maybe you’re working too hard and can’t relax enough to sleep,” offered Leonard.

“I have been working a lot,” conceded his roommate. “We haven’t shared communal meals or participated in extra-curricular activities.”

“Ramona’s made it quite clear not to disturb you.” Leonard swallowed some water as he debated whether to continue. “Sheldon, have you had a relationship with a female before?”

“Of course. Aside from my mother and Meemaw there’s Missy, my cousin—”

“Non-familial female.”

“Well there’s Penny.”

“I was meaning in a romantic capacity.”

“Oh.” Sheldon made a face. “Of course not. Why would you even bring it up?”

“Well it’s just an observation but you’re spending an inordinate amount of time with Ramona: she’s over every night and on weekends and you eat together and work together and, I don’t know, doesn’t that kind of describe a girlfriend slash boyfriend dynamic?”

“Psh. Ramona is not my girlfriend. Or friend for that matter.” Sheldon took a moment to think. “She’s most certainly not a colleague. No, she’s a devotee. Someone who praises me and caters to my needs and allows me to work in relative peace whereas Penny has been one distraction after another and…."

More silence.
“Sheldon—”

“Perhaps I should forego warm milk for an antacid.”

“Give it a try,” Leonard said. “Though I don’t think it’ll work.” He rinsed his glass and set it in the sink. “See you in the morning.”

Leonard walked down the hall and around the corner, leaving Sheldon to his own thoughts.

xTBBTx

The elevator door opened and Penny got out just as Leonard stepped out of his apartment.

“Oh good!” she said urgently. “Leonard, my car won’t start and I’m going to be late for work.”

“No problem,” he replied. “I was just going to Raj’s for Halo so I can drop you off.”

“You’re a peach.” The pair got into the elevator and descended to the lobby.

“So where’s Sheldon?” Penny asked nonchalantly.

“Where else? In with Ramona.” Again the physicist thought he caught a weird look on Penny’s face but it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“Man that’s a lot of science stuff. I caught them talking about it in the elevator the other day. It sounded pretty intense,” said Penny as the pair exited the building and went to Leonard’s car.

“Something about using a super mirror to find gravity.”

Leonard thought for a moment before a smile came to his face.

“You mean mirror-symmetry. Yeah, Sheldon’s been working with gravitational posits to see if he can come up with an overall theory that would incorporate—” He glanced at Penny and read her blank stare. “Not important.” He popped the locks and they got in his car.

“Leonard,” she said shyly. “Do you think you could teach me a little physics? I mean it doesn’t have to be a PBS special. It’s just so I can understand what Sheldon’s doing.” Out of the corner of her eye she caught Leonard staring at her. “I mean I’m his friend, right? And physics is a big part of who he is and what he does so I should know what he’s doing.”

“His work is pretty complex,” Leonard warned as he started the car. “Did you take any science in high school?”

“I did the class with the frogs.” Here she smiled proudly. “I gutted that thing like a deer.”

“O-kay. Well, remember when I told you he was working with subatomic particles on projects involving the early universe?” He pulled out of his lot and onto the roadway.

“That’s what mirror-symmetry is all about?”

“Mirror-symmetry is a…kind of tool that physicists use for doing calculations in string theory,” Leonard explained as he drove. “It can do a lot of jobs and Sheldon is using it to work on gravitational properties.”

“So mirror-symmetry is like a multi-head screwdriver and Sheldon’s using it to take apart gravity,” Penny said tentatively.
“Basically. It’s obviously a lot more complex than that but it’s a good place to start,” he said cheerily.

“I just don’t get how you guys can talk about stuff like this like it was normal speak. I mean you all have to be geniuses.”

“I do have an I.Q. of one hundred and seventy three.” Leonard smirked. “Not as high as Sheldon but I get by.”

“Huh.” Penny bit her lip as she looked out the side window. “I guess you have to be pretty smart to get a phd in physics.”

“I guess.”

“Ramona must be smart to talk with Sheldon.”

“There’s a difference between talking with him and collaborating with him.”

“Does he like her?” she asked casually. Leonard looked through the rear view mirror and noted her expression was stone.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

“She’s so possessive she’s practically a stalker,” growled Penny.

“Actually being a stalker would imply that she followed Sheldon which she doesn’t since that means she’d have to leave his side to do so,” Leonard said with a grim smile.


“No paintball. No Star Trek.”

“Get out of town!” she gasped.

“Apparently all of this has been distracting him from ‘greatness’.”

“Bullshit.” A pause and then she growled. “He was great as he was. Now he’s practically a robot.”

“Howard’s already convinced Sheldon is a robot,” chuckled Leonard.

“He’s kinda whacked but he’s got feelings,” Penny said. “He’s been alone a lot so I think it kinda messed him up.” She pursed her lips. “Ramona’s making him worse not better.”

“I completely agree. He’s starting to have problems sleeping and he’s talking less when we’re alone. He’s always on edge as if Ramona’s going to jump out of the refrigerator or closet and punish him for having fun.” Leonard shrugged. “Not my kind of relationship.”

“I just wish he’d say something. I mean he has to be uncomfortable with the way things are going.” Leonard made to speak. “And his feelings are just as important as hers.”

The car pulled into the Cheesecake Factory parking lot.

“Just tell him that their relationship needs to move at a pace that both of them are comfortable with,” she said as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

“You sound like you’ve got a handle on this. Why don’t you tell him?”
“Because I’m a female friend and it wouldn’t sound good coming from me,” she said neutrally. “Thanks for the lift, Leonard.”

“No problem.” He waited until she was inside before driving off.

Leonard thought over their conversation and gave a loud snort.

Penny was Sheldon’s female friend alright.

And she most definitely wasn’t a gay one.

Penny crammed what clothing she could in the washer. Tips were short in the past week so she had to dig through pocket lint to do one load of wash. Fortunately the four other tops she tossed into various washers were left on the folding table so she was already ahead of the game.

“Hi,” said Ramona as she came to stand next to Penny carrying a laundry basket of clothes. “Are you using the other machines?”

“No,” Penny replied. She tossed in a scoop of laundry detergent and closed the lid before sliding in the money.

“I’m surprised you’re not out partying. I mean, you seem the partying type.”

“Sometimes people can surprise ya.” Turning to the graduate student Penny noted that Ramona was putting an assortment of brightly colored t-shirts and plaid pants into the machines. “Where’s Sheldon?” she asked.

“Dr. Cooper is upstairs working. It’s silly for someone of his stature to be doing his own laundry.”

“Alrighty then.” Penny put on a false smile. “Well, you have a good night.” She turned to go.

“I see how you look at him.”

Penny stopped. “Who?”

“Dr. Cooper,” said Ramona. “Don’t get me wrong, I completely understand. He’s handsome and brilliant. How could you not want him?”

“He’s my friend,” the waitress said crisply.

“Oh, okay.” Ramona measured a scoop of soap before depositing it in a machine. “That’s good to hear. Especially since he really is out of your league.”

“I’m not interested in Sheldon.” A frown came to Penny’s face. “And what do you mean he’s ‘out of my league’?”

“It’s obvious,” Ramona said sweetly as she measured another cup of soap. “He’s a brilliant physicist, one of the brightest of his generation, while you’re a server of some sort given your uniform from the other day.” She dumped in the soap into another machine and then turned to Penny. “Look, I’m not saying this to be mean. Dr. Cooper is on the verge of something great and doesn’t need to be distracted by silly wastes of time.” She returned to measuring out soap.

“So what’s exactly a silly waste of time?” Penny said, now thoroughly annoyed.
"You know, video games, comic books, science fiction television shows—"

"Hanging out with friends, chatting with neighbors," the Nebraskan said sarcastically.

Ramona closed the lids and slipped the money into the machines.

"I’m glad you understand." She picked up the basket and with a stiff smile exited the room.

Penny waited a few minutes before following since she had the itch to throw Ramona down the elevator shaft.

xTBBTx

Sheldon and Ramona stepped out of the elevator at his floor. While it was handy that the graduate student had her own car Sheldon found that she wasn’t the best candidate for car games. She’d all but put a kibosh on any subjects not science-related and Sheldon longed for even one rousing game of ‘list George Lucas’ egregious ‘corrections’ to the original Star Wars trilogy’.

He fished out his keys from his pocket and put the correct one in the lock. His hand froze as the sounds of laughter came from Penny’s apartment. The high pitched cackle of his neighbor made him wince but it was the other laugh that caused his jaw muscles to stiffen.

Leonard.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Ramona.

"Of course not," Sheldon replied with a twitchy mouth. Just as he opened the door Penny’s door opened and a giggling Penny and Leonard emerged.

"Oh, hey Sheldon," chuckled Penny. "Been a while." He opened his mouth to speak.

"He’s been busy," Ramona said firmly.

The Nebraskan ignored the comment and stared fixedly at her friend. "I haven’t seen you out. No paintball. No kite flying." Sheldon seemed taken aback that she knew about his Sunday afternoon jaunts to the park.

"He’s been working on symmetries in quantum field theory," Ramona explained.

Penny folded her arms across her chest. "Well as fun as that sounds I’m sure there’s plenty of other things he could be doing."

Ramona took a step towards Penny that the Nebraskan mirrored.

"Nothing this important," growled the graduate student. "In fact Dr. Cooper wrote that science demands nothing less than the fervent and unconditional dedication of our entire lives."

Penny looked to Sheldon who cast his gaze to the ground.

"Whatever floats your boat, Dr. C." She turned to Leonard. "You going over to John and Yoko land or you wanna hang here?"

"Here’s fine," Leonard said quickly. "We can order a pizza." Penny entered the apartment and he smiled at Sheldon and Ramona before following and closing the door.

"Physics, physics, physics," mocked Penny as she stomped off to the washroom. "You know Leonard, forget what I said about wanting to learn about it," she said loudly as she washed her
“Don’t give up on it,” Leonard said earnestly. “It can be confusing and at times beyond frustrating but in the end it’s worth it.”

“Yeah, well maybe I’m not a physics kinda gal.” She returned to the living room with a smile. “But I am a pizza one.”

“Whatever my lady desires,” Leonard said amiably as he pulled out his phone.

Penny flopped on the couch. She was flat broke. Fourteen hundred bucks to overhaul her engine.

“At least the check engine light isn’t on,” she chuckled. Penny closed her eyes and groaned as her head rested against the couch back. “What the frak am I gonna do?” Rent was coming due soon and she was going to be short. She wasn’t even going to think about her cable bill. Penny sighed. Then there was her nephew’s birthday coming up and she had nothing to send him. The only thing was she didn’t want to be the loser aunt that didn’t get him anything.

She heard the sounds of Leonard, Raj and Howard chatting in the hall and an idea struck her. Penny bounced off the couch and quickly opened her door.

“Hey guys,” she said amiably. “Where ya off to?”

“The comic book store,” grinned Leonard. “Stan Lee’s going to be there.”

“Stan Lee? Really?” she mock gasped.

“You have no idea who he is,” chuckled Howard.

“I’m gonna guess he does something in the comic book line but, yeah, I’m just reaching at this point,” she winked. “But anyways it’s cool you’re going there because I was hoping you could do me a favor and pick up a couple of Spider-Man comics for me.”

Raj whispered into Howard’s ear.

“No, you’re not having a stroke,” the engineer said. “Penny asked Leonard to buy her comics.”

“They’re for my nephew, smartiboots. It’s his birthday.” She looked sheepishly at her neighbor. “You mind if I pay you later? I just got my car fixed.”

“No problem,” Leonard replied. “Hey, you know what would be cool? Get an autograph for your nephew. He’d go bananas over it.”

“It doesn’t cost anything does it?”

“Nope. The only thing is that you can only get three things signed.”

“That sounds good,” Penny smiled. “Could you get one for me?” She noted Leonard’s mouth twitch.

“Sure, I guess. I mean I already have three comic books for him to sign but I guess I could—”

“Forget that. Let me get my purse and we’ll go.” She turned to fetch her purse from the couch and then returned to close and lock her door. “So we’re all going to fit in the car?”
“There’s only four of us,” replied Leonard.

“Isn’t Sheldon coming?” The three men stared incredulously at her. “Oh yeah, what was I thinking?” She glared at the door to apartment 4A. “This is stupid,” she growled. “Leonard, can you pick something out for me to have him sign for Sheldon? Something really cool.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, and get another comic for you. My nephew only needs one autograph and I’ve one to spare.”

Leonard grinned. “I’ll be right back.”

He opened the door and haphazardly sprayed the bottoms of his shoes before darting off to his room. Penny stepped onto the mat in the apartment. Sheldon sat in his spot typing away on his laptop while Ramona had herself snuggled in Leonard’s chair doing her homework.

“Hey Sheldon,” Penny said cheerily, more to annoy Ramona than to reflect her mood.

“Hello Penny,” he replied.

“So you’re not coming out to meet Stan Lee?”

His mouth twitched. “No. Apparently I’m making terrific progress on my research and can’t be distracted.” Sheldon looked to Ramona who smiled. Penny rolled her eyes.

“O-kay. Well if you ever decide to go back into biology instead of making fish glow maybe you could spend your time growing a pair and doing what you want,” Penny said sarcastically as Leonard came down the hall.

Sheldon cocked his head. “Growing a pair of what? Flippers?”

“A little lower,” said Leonard as he crossed the living room.

“Gills?”

“Keep going.” Leonard and Penny left the apartment.

“Why would Penny want me to grow two tails?”

Sheldon caught Ramona’s disapproving stare and went back to his work.

XxX

“Hoo-ray, we’re finally inside the store,” sighed Penny after spending forty five minutes in a line outside the comic shop. “I guess a lot of people heard of Stan Lee. Who is he anyway?”

As one every guy within earshot turned to stare incredulously at her.

“Name me a song in last week’s Top Ten,” Penny snapped. The guys all went back to what they were doing.

Leonard leaned towards Penny and dropped his voice. “In collaboration with several artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, Stan Lee co-created Spider-Man, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, Thor, the X-Men—”

“Ohokay I heard of X-Men and Spider-Man,” said Penny. “I just thought they were movies.” She
sensed eyes turning towards her again. “Who’s the Black Eyed Peas?” Again the stares vanished.

“Wow, hey Penny,” said Stuart as the comic shop owner came over to their place in line. “I’m surprised you’re here.”


Stuart looked around. “I see no Sheldon. Still assimilated by the Borg Queen?”

“Resistance is futile,” said Howard.

“As we speak her little drone is busy clacking away on the computer,” sighed Leonard.

“That’s too bad,” said Stuart. “And I’m not just saying that because Sheldon is a great customer. That reminds me do you still want me to hang onto his comics? It’s been three weeks and while one meal a day’s better than none I still wouldn’t mind having breakfast once in a while.”

“Ring them up separately and I’ll take care of it,” said Leonard.

“Terrific.” Stuart smiled awkwardly at Penny. “Do you have something for Stan to sign?”

“Yeah, Leonard gave me some comics. One’s going to my nephew, one more to Leonard and the other for the whackadoodle sitting at home on the couch.”

Stuart looked over her comics as she fanned them out and his eyebrow rose.

“Wow. Amazing Spider-Man forty two. You sure you want to get that one signed?”

“Why?” She looked at the cover of Spider-Man being tagged by a punch with the caption ‘The Birth of a Super-Hero’.

“In this condition I’d say it’s worth about two hundred bucks.”

“What?” she gasped and turned to Leonard. “I said get something cool for Sheldon not break the bank.”

“Oh it’s cool alright,” Stuart said soothingly. “It’s the first full appearance of Mary Jane Watson. Peter meets her on the last page.” The Nebraskan flipped to it.

“Face it tiger, you just hit the jackpot,” Penny read and then cracked a smile. “Love Peter’s wide-eyed gaaaaw look.”

“MJ is an irresistible combination of looks and personality. She completely turns Peter’s life upside down. I love drawing her.”

“You draw?”

“And paint but drawing’s my bread and butter.” Here Stuart gave a self-deprecating smile. “Don’t let the fancy threads and comic book store fool you.” Penny grinned and playfully punched his arm.

“I bet you’re a good artist. I’ll have to see your stuff sometime.”

“I have a sketchbook at the cash,” Stuart said quickly. “I’m sure Leonard could hold your spot in line.” He flashed the physicist a ‘help me out, buddy!’ look.
“Uh, sure,” said Leonard and with that Penny and Stuart went to the cash. Leonard turned to Howard. “What the hell’s happening?”

“I believe Stuart’s putting the moves on Penny,” chuckled Howard.

“I *know* that. I mean why is she falling for it?”


“He also buys Kraft Dinner by the case,” countered Leonard.

“Wouldn’t you if you could get all the comics you wanted at cost?”

“True,” Leonard conceded. The line began to move. “Penny!”

The blonde turned at her name and said something to Stuart before returning to the group.

“Wow, I can’t believe how good Stuart is,” she gushed. “He even drew me after the first time I came into the store. One visit and he had me down to a ‘T’.” Penny smiled. “I can’t wait to get it framed.”

“I’ll have to remember that the next time a woman accuses me of oogling: no ma’am, I’m an artist assessing your lines and curves,” said Howard.

“You’ll still have your nuts handed to you, Howard,” Raj whispered into his ear.

“Fascinating,” Leonard cut in before zeroing in on Penny. “Stuart gave you the picture?”

“Yeah. We’re gonna hook up next week and go over his portfolio.” She beamed. “Stuart’s a cool guy.”

“Yeah he is,” Leonard admitted as Penny opened her comic book and began to read.

XxX

The elevator doors opened and Penny and Leonard came out and parted to their individual apartments.

“Thanks again, Leonard,” Penny said as she opened her door. “Sorry to dash but laundry calls.”

“No problem.” The physicist unlocked his door and entered to find Sheldon at the whiteboard puzzling things out while Ramona sat in his stuffed chair. He closed the door and slipped off his shoes but didn’t bother spraying his feet. Leonard was sure all the antibacterial clouds it spawned weren’t good for his asthma.

“Hey Sheldon,” he said brightly.

“Dr. Cooper’s working,” Ramona said crisply.

“Well I thought ‘Dr. Cooper’ would like to know that Penny got a comic book signed for him,” Leonard said brusquely as he approached his roommate.

Sheldon put the cap on his marker and put it on the ledge before turning to take the proffered comic book. With delighted eyes he took in the ‘To Sheldon, Excelsior! Stan Lee’.

“I’ll take the comic off next month’s rent,” Leonard added.
Sheldon’s eyes flashed to Leonard.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t thank me. Penny’s the one who thought of you.”

Ramona cleared her throat.

“Dr. Cooper should really get back to work,” she said.

“I suppose.” Leonard crossed over to the hall and then stopped. “By the way, Stuart really scored today. Apparently Penny’s a sucker for art and one thing led to another and they’re going on a date next week.” Pause. “Just thought you should know.”

Ramona got out of her seat and went to Sheldon.

“Dr. Cooper is at the forefront of science. The last things he cares about are comic books and waitresses.” She held out her hand for the comic book.

Sheldon’s eyes dropped to the comic book and traced Stan Lee’s signature.

“Dr. Cooper?”

He raised his head to face her and the graduate student took an involuntary step back.

XxX

Across the hall Penny got the last of her clothes in the basket and tossed in the bottle of fabric softener and box of detergent. Already her mind had been picking out a spot in the apartment for her portrait.

“Got my nephew the coolest gift on the planet and got me a little something too,” she said as she grabbed the basket and keys and stepped out of the apartment.

At that moment 4A opened and Ramona dashed out only to stop dead as she saw Penny.

“Tramp!” the graduate student hissed before practically running down the stairs.

Now curious, Penny locked her door and went over to her neighbors’ apartment.

“What’s the gist, my physicists?” she said as she took in Sheldon staring at the comic book in his hands. “You like it?” she prompted.

“Monday after work you will take me to the DMV so I can get my learner’s permit,” Sheldon said crisply and marched past Leonard and around the corner.

Penny cocked her head. “What the frak?”

“That was a ‘thank you’,” grinned Leonard. “And here’s one from me.” He began to shuffle from one foot to the other. “‘Ding dong the witch is dead!’” he sang joyfully.

The Nebraskan chuckled and closed the door behind her.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Stan Lee
The Half-Glass Paradigm Shift


xTBBTx

“You know, I’m never gonna crap on your comic books again,” said Penny as she opened her food container. Sheldon turned in his spot towards his couch companion with a frown.

“First of all, mentioning feces in the midst of dining is uncouth; second, you’ve never defecated on my comic books to begin with so your entire statement is ridiculous,” he tsked.

“What he means is: what brought you to this epiphany?” asked Leonard as he dabbed ketchup on his fries.

“Stuart. He’s an amazing artist. He showed me portraits of super-people and people-people and they could just walk right off the page,” Penny gushed. “He’s a total art genius!”

“Penny, Stuart owns a comic book store not appearing in the comic books he peddles. He’s hardly an artistic ‘genius’,” the East Texan sniffed. “Jack Kirby was a genius. Van Gogh was a genius. By all accounts Stuart is a competent albeit uninspired artist. Think of him as an engineer as opposed to those who think and dream in the higher sciences.”

“I know someone who sounds positively high at the moment,” mumbled Howard before taking a bite of his burger.

Penny narrowed her eyes. “I bet you haven’t even seen Stuart’s work. Besides, I’d like to see you try to draw something.”

“I don’t need to draw, I’ve an eidetic memory,” countered Sheldon. “And speaking of images burned into my mind for all time you sent me a LOLcat. That’s a strike.”

“Anyhoo,” Penny continued as she munched on a French fry. “He’s got a piece in an upcoming exhibit so we’re gonna check it out.”

“That’s three strikes.”

“What?”

“You’ve garnered three strikes.”

“What are you even talking about?”

Sheldon got up and began to pace towards the kitchen before turning at his whiteboard, his hands clasped behind his back.

“First to order, June twenty third, you and a male suitor were cackling in the hall in violation of the noise ordinance. Strike one. September seventh, you stole my milk. Strike two. The LOLcat you sent me Wednesday. Strike three.”

Penny sat back on the couch with a frown.

“Okay, I get the milk and LOLcat things but I can’t make noise in the hall?” she asked.
incredulously.

“Inordinate level of noise.”

“Be thankful he hasn’t outlawed breathing,” chuckled Howard.

“Whatever,” Penny said as she rolled her eyes and continued to eat.

“Regardless, it’s three strikes,” said Sheldon. He went to the refrigerator for the hot sauce. “As the metaphorical game goes, you’re ‘out’.”

“As in out of this conversation?” Penny asked innocently. Sheldon pursed his lips.

“You have three choices: apologize for your transgressions, take my online course or face banishment from the apartment for no less than one year.”

“You wrote a course?” asked Leonard.

“It’s varying but in its initial setup it delves into my expectations for social protocol and overall conduct in my presence. Furthermore, following the quiz and short question-and-answer section you’ll—”

“Whatever, Sheldon, I’m not taking a course,” Penny said testily. Again he stopped by his whiteboard.

“Penny, I’m serious,” he said crisply.

“But it’s just a LOLcat! You’re making it sound like I sent you a picture of vomit.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” he sniffed. “I entrusted you with my email for the purpose of vital communication and you sent me pap.”

“Maybe you need pap every once in a while to get you out of anal mode.” Penny sat up and closed her food packet.

“Because I don’t share in your juvenile sense of humor doesn’t mean I’m ‘anal’.”

“‘Juvenile’? Who wears superhero underwear?” Sheldon dropped his jaw.

“You were in my underwear drawer?” he gasped.

“Of course not. I saw them when you were doing your laundry.”

Sheldon began to pace.

“So you not only steal wifi and milk, you now take it upon yourself to steal glances at my undergarments?” he tsked.

“Just to be clear, I didn’t say I liked your ass, I said you’re being an ass,” Penny replied coldly.

“Apologize,” Sheldon growled.

“For you being an ass?” she said sweetly.

“You’re being intentionally obtuse,” he said with a twitchy mouth. “Apologize or take my course.”
“This is crap, Sheldon,” she snapped. “Even if I was sorry for sending the silly email I’m most definitely not sorry for laughing in the hall. You might live by crazy in your world but that doesn’t mean you can rule mine.”

“Very well then,” he said, eyes narrowing. “You are hereby banished from the apartment for one year.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Don’t make me call the police and have you removed from the premises,” he said coldly. Penny looked to Leonard in shock.

“It’s in the Roommate Agreement,” he said apologetically. “I just didn’t think it was serious.”

“Fine!” Penny stood up to glare at Sheldon.

“Yes?” Sheldon asked expectantly.

“I’m sorry you have your foot up your ass.” She reached down and picked up an onion ring from his plate.

“Penny! No one touches my food!” he squawked.

“For freedom!” she called out as she held it up before tossing it back on his plate and storming from the room with her food.

“Isn’t this how Gandhi’s movement got started?” Howard quipped.

Sheldon glared at him before taking up his plate and emptying his food in the trash.

“Remember, after you leave I still have to live with him,” Leonard muttered.

“That’s the beauty of it,” the engineer grinned.

xTBBTx

Leonard gathered the empty chip and snack bags from the coffee table and stuck them in the garbage can.

“That was fun,” he said over enthusiastically as he turned to glance at his roommate who was reading something on the laptop. “Especially with friends like Raj and Howard.” Pause. “Sharing pizza. Conversation.”

“As you’ve not made a point I’ll assume this is some sort of third-rate soliloquy,” Sheldon mumbled distractedly.

“I’m just saying that it was fun. But it seemed like there was something missing, y’know?”

“I can’t say I do.”

“Oh sure you do.” Leonard took the pop cans and put them in the recycle box. “I mean we had three extra slices of pizza and look at the argument we had about distributing them.”

“Which wouldn’t have lasted so long had someone chosen something other than ‘Spock’ in Rock-Paper-Scissors-Lizard-Spock.”

*This isn’t working.* Leonard took out the bag of garbage and tied it.
“Then there’s the disrupted flow of conversation,” he said.

“Ah yes, who’d imagine there’d be something more to talk about than Sex and the City?” the lanky physicist tsked. “If anything our level of conversation was refreshingly elevated tonight.” Leonard snorted.

“We talked about alien genitalia and how Sarak and Amanda made Spock,” the shorter man scoffed.

“That’s right, anatomy and reproduction—both scientific topics which were thoroughly discussed rather than preemptively dismissed as ‘whacked’.”

“Still it’s been quiet not having—company—around for coffee in the morning.” Leonard learned quickly not to mention Penny by name as it put Sheldon into a foul mood.

“Although the integrity of my milk supply has been restored.”

Leonard frowned at Sheldon’s even-keeled responses.

“So you’re saying you don’t miss Penny?” he snapped. At once Sheldon turned to glare at his roommate. The shorter man sighed. “Look Sheldon, I’m sure she’d be more than willing to come back if you let her.”

Sheldon turned back to his computer and began typing.

“This has nothing to do with me,” he sniffed. “She can return to my home as soon as she apologizes.”

“Yeah, but don’t you think you’re being just a little bit hypersensitive?”

Sheldon stopped typing. “Dangerous words for a man with two strikes, Leonard.” He resumed typing.

“Fine, be alone.” Leonard crossed the room to the door with the bag of garbage in hand. “Just remember that she’s your friend and you’re supposed to be hers.”

“That doesn’t mean I should lower my standards.”

“Friendship isn’t quantifiable. It is or it isn’t.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Sheldon. “Given her blatant transgressions and disregard for personal property it’s obvious we shouldn’t be friends.”

“That’s not what I meant!” gasped Leonard. He took in Sheldon as the latter typed away before slipping into the hall. To his delight Penny was unlocking her door, her Cheesecake Factory attire less stained than usual although she looked exhausted.

“Hi Penny,” he said as he closed the door.

“Hey Leonard,” she smiled weakly. “How are things?”

“Not bad. Can’t complain. Still not talking to Sheldon?” he asked innocently.

Immediately Penny narrowed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest.

“He still expecting me to apologize?” She took in Leonard’s helpless expression. “Then no dice.”
“Look, he really misses you. I really miss you.”

“You can always come over to my place,” she offered.

Leonard was unsure. “Your cable still cut?”

Penny gave a half smirk. “We can always meet in the hall.”

The physicist gave an exasperated sigh.

“Penny, this is stupid.”

“You’re right. So go tell Dr. Whackadoodle I’m not going to apologize for something I didn’t do.”

Leonard cocked his head. “Technically, you did steal milk and send him the LOLcat.”

A menacing smile came to Penny’s lips even as her eyes hardened.

“That’s strike one, Leonard,” she said crisply before entering her apartment and closing her door.

“This is *stupid*,” growled Leonard. “Strike, strike, strike. Man, I don’t even watch football.”

XxX

Penny slipped her pajama top on and put her damp hair in a clip before padding her way to the kitchen. Out of habit she went to the refrigerator before remembering there was nothing inside. With a sigh she took a pot from the cupboard, filled it with water and set it on the stove to heat.

Needless to say it was a bad sign when even ramen noodles were a luxury she could no longer afford.

She went to the couch and flopped down with a sigh. It positively stunned her how much of her life revolved around apartment 4A. From morning coffees with Leonard to dinners and even movie nights Penny had practically become a third roommate. Not that she didn’t still go out dancing or to the beach with her other friends; her acquaintance with Leonard and Sheldon was comfy like her brown slipper boots whereas times out with Gwen entailed a bit of work since Penny had to make sure she looked at her best.

Penny stared at her television. She supposed she could watch a dvd but she had really burnt through them when she had no tv for the first few weeks. Perhaps she’d kill a little time with Facebook. She picked up her laptop and clicked to the net. Suddenly, a video of Sheldon wearing the smarmiest smile Penny had ever seen began to play.

“Greetings, onion ring toucher,” he began, causing Penny to roll her eyes. “You are probably wondering why you cannot IM with your little friends about how much you heart various things. Well, this recorded message is alerting you that I am putting an end to your parasitic piggybacking upon our wifi. If you want to remedy the situation you can contact the phone company, set up your own wifi and pay for it, or you may apologize to me.”

Penny stuck out her tongue as the image went black.

“Two can play at this game,” she said with an icy sweetness as she reached for her phone. Normally she’d feel guilty for using the wifi but Leonard had said it was no big deal and he was paying for half so it wasn’t up to Sheldon to decide.

L, S blocked wifi. Help? She texted.
Leonard: Just a sec
“It’s on,” Penny growled.

As Sheldon stepped out of his bedroom he heard Leonard talking to someone.

“Odd. It’s early and we have to go to work soon,” the East Texan yawned and went into the washroom to do his business.

His spine went rigid the moment a familiar high-pitched laugh rang out.

With a scowl on his face he finished up and the next two minutes he spent scrubbing his hands were the longest of his life.

Sheldon tightened the belt on his housecoat and marched out of the washroom into the living room.

“Hey Sheldon,” said Leonard amiably but the lanky man’s attention was focused on the open door and the blonde neighbor sitting in her chair in the hallway beyond sipping a cup of coffee.

“Why is the door open?” Sheldon growled. “Why are you out in the hall?”

“Brr,” said Penny as she rubbed her arm. “Gee Leonard, did you feel a cool breeze just now?”

“Now that you mention it,” grinned Leonard. “It does seem a little gassy in here.”

“Quit this schoolyard paradigm,” said Sheldon. “I’m not deceased.”

Penny’s gaze remained fixed on Leonard. “So Leonard, let me know when Sheldon gets up. I can’t wait for him to have breakfast.”

“What did you do?” asked Leonard.

“Yes, what did you do?” Sheldon repeated.

“There’s one thing I’ve learned about Sheldon, he’s a creature of habit; and if something were to prevent him from performing his little rituals he might find it—unpleasant.” Penny smiled slyly before taking a deep sip of coffee.

“I’m not even going to ask,” said Leonard as he went down the hall with his mug of coffee.

Sheldon stared at his neighbor. It had been eight days since he’d banished her and apart from hearing her in the hall talking to Leonard or seeing her unlocking her door and entering her apartment without a word this was the first time Penny was before him with a smile, albeit a disturbing one.

“Alright,” the physicist said overenthusiastically. “Two can play at this game.” He stretched. “Ah, how nice to start my day with the door open to an empty hallway.”

“Ooo,” Penny said in a ghostly tone.

Sheldon pursed his lips although there was a glint of amusement in his eyes.
“Time for breakfast,” he said and moved to the kitchen for his juice. He put a hand on the refrigerator door and paused. His head turned to Penny, who sat with that same taunting smile. With determination Sheldon quickly opened the fridge and—all looked normal. He took out the orange juice and opened the cap. “Of course if someone was to tamper with the orange juice she’d also put Leonard into jeopardy since he also drinks it.” His eyes flicked to Penny.

The Nebraskan took a sip of coffee.

Sheldon set the juice and cap on the counter and went to the cupboard for a glass. As soon as he opened the door he saw that the glasses were not in the order he arranged them.

“Ah, yes, rearranging glasses. How juvenile.” He pulled out a glass and noticed that it didn’t have a label. A sinking feeling came to his gut as he pulled out another glass—no label. Glass after glass was taken from the cupboard and Sheldon quickly realized he couldn’t tell a juice glass from the ones for milk, water or miscellaneous liquids.

With a scowl he turned abruptly to Penny.

“You’ve been in the apartment,” he said, incensed.

“Juice is getting warm,” she said sweetly.

Sheldon’s mouth twitched and he went to a lower cupboard and took out a large plastic cup. Looking at his glass glasses he guesstimated the volume of a half glass and poured the juice in the plastic cup.

“See? Improvisation,” he said stiffly.

“That’s not a half glass of juice,” said Penny. “You always start your day with a half glass of juice.”

“It is half for my regular glass.”

“Yes, but you’re not drinking from the other glass are you?” Penny got up. “Ah, well, a quarter cup, a third of a cup, who cares if it isn’t a half cup as long as you have your juice.” She dragged her chair to her door. “Fluid intake is fluid intake, right? I mean, it isn’t an exact science or anything.”

Sheldon’s eyes shot daggers as the waitress moved in her chair and then disappeared into her apartment. He took a breath and then picked up his glass of juice but before the liquid touched his lips he slammed the cup to the counter and angrily picked up the juice carton and began to pour.

XxX

Sheldon sat in the passenger seat of Leonard’s car with a scowl on his face and his hands on his stomach.

“Explain to me again how Penny got into the apartment?” he said crisply.

“Well I didn’t let her in,” said Leonard. “Oh wait, I forgot I gave her an emergency key just in case we’re locked out.”

“You gave her a key?!”

“Sheldon, it’s not like she’s going to rifle through our belongings.” Leonard caught Sheldon’s death glare. “Well, apart from glasses I suppose. That reminds me, do we need more juice?”
The car went over a bump and the East Texan let out a little groan.

“Sheldon, this has got to stop,” Leonard sighed.

“Oh this is far from over, Leonard,” Sheldon said coldly. “Pull in at the gas station, I need some Tums.”

The shorter man rolled his eyes and did what he was told.

XxX

When the elevator opened Sheldon bee-lined to Penny’s door.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Silence.

“I can see the shadow of your feet under the door,” he said, irritated. “You have a key to my apartment. I want it back.”

The feet disappeared from the door. Sheldon’s jaw clicked.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny!”

A slip of paper came sliding under the door. Sheldon picked it up and read:


His eyes lingered over the last two words. If he’d actually cared about his relationship with Penny he’d be hurt seeing the personal rejection written in her hand.

“Very well,” he said with a grim look. As soon as he heard Leonard open their door the lanky physicist stormed past his roommate and into the apartment.

“No good can come of this,” sighed Leonard.

Sheldon had marched straight into his bedroom.

He didn’t take off his shoes.

xTBBTx

Penny sat reclined on the couch talking to Gwen on the phone.

“Yeah so anyways either I’ve gotta get a second job or else I’m in the crapper…I dunno. They keep fooling around with my hours so I don’t think I can just walk in and—oh crap.” She checked the time on her phone. “Gotta get the laundry. Bear with me.”

She got off the couch and slipped on her flip-flops before opening the door, making sure to grab
the basket before locking up.

“Yeah… Yeah….” She stepped into the elevator and went to the basement.

“Yeah, maybe I should look into a sugar daddy… Definitely not. Sheldon Cooper is absolutely… So what? He told me his name so why can’t I use it? … No I’m not!”

She walked down the hall to the laundry room.

“Anyhoo, you and Troy still ‘seeing each other’ or are you actually going out? … Uh huh….”

She went to her dryer and opened the door.

Her clothes were missing.

“Sonofabitch! … Not you. Dr. Whackadoodle. Look I’ve gotta go.”

Penny hung up and raced back to the elevator.

XxX

Sheldon sat on the couch cleaning his paintball mask with an antifogging agent while Leonard took out a paintball gun from the duffle bag.

“The archaeologists might know how to work a bullwhip but this is a game of direct and indirect fire,” said the East Texan. “I’d like to see them with their brushes and trowels try to calculate azimuth and elevation angles while correcting their aim through gravitational observation and angle calculation.”

“I wouldn’t be so cocky,” replied Leonard. “Raj, Howard, Leslie and I met them before and they cleaned our clocks.”

“Of course; you were missing the crucial variable.”

“Yeah, wish we knew Penny then,” Leonard sighed. He caught Sheldon’s scowl and began cleaning the barrel of his gun.

Pound! Pound! Pound! “Sheldon! Where the hell are my clothes?”

“What did you do?” groaned Leonard as he got up from his chair.

“What had to be done, Leonard,” Sheldon said casually. “No more no less.”

The shorter man set his gun down on the side table and proceeded to the door. As soon as he opened it Penny marched into the room.

“Where are they?” she growled.

Sheldon continued cleaning his mask.

“You mean the ones you left unattended downstairs in the laundry room even though there’s a sign prohibiting such an act?” He set the mask on the table. “I thought the note you slipped me was a declaration swearing off clothing so you subsequently washed them for the purpose of donation.”

“You threw out my clothes?!” Penny’s hands were fists.
“Of course not.” He got up from the couch and rested his hands behind his back. “Although I do recall seeing them somewhere….”

“Sheldon….”

“Ah yes, earlier this evening.” He strolled to the window. “I happened to be gazing out and a brassiere caught my eye.”

Penny rushed to the window and saw her clothes hanging from the telephone wire. Immediately she turned to Sheldon with a murderous glare.

“Get them down,” she hissed.

“Apologize,” he replied equally as serious. Penny threw her hands into the air.

“You know what? Forget it. You wanna live in a world with so many rules it takes the f-u-n out of things, go ahead.” She picked up Leonard’s paintball gun and showed it to Sheldon. “Where’s the guy covered in mud and sweat who went down in a flurry of paintballs?”

“I’m still here,” Sheldon snapped.

“Oh really?” Penny pointed the gun at his spot on the couch.

Sheldon’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Liberating the captive.”

Leonard stepped towards her. “Penny don’t—”

She pulled the trigger and to her surprise three paintballs hit Sheldon’s seat cushion. Immediately the lanky physicist rushed to his spot.

“What did you do!” he squawked.

“It’s loaded?!” Penny gasped as she turned to Leonard. “Who keeps a loaded paintball gun in an apartment?”

Leonard was sheepish. “I was meaning to unload the balls but—”

Sheldon was positively irate as he did his best to wipe away the paint with his cleaning cloth.

“Leave!” he growled, his eyes flashing to his neighbor.

Penny’s stomach dropped even as all of the frustration she felt over the past two weeks came to her lips.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have me around much longer disrupting things since I’m behind on rent and will have to move anyways,” she snapped.

“Yes, with the late night parties, unpaid cable and late rental payments I’m sure you’re the model tenant any building would love to have,” snorted Sheldon.

“Screw you!” Penny turned on her heel and marched from the room.

“Idiot,” said Leonard who glared furiously at his roommate as the latter continued cleaning the cushion.
“What?” snapped Sheldon. “This is her fault! If she’d only apologized for—”

“You better make things right or you’re gonna lose her.”

“Lose her? I’m better off without her!”

Leonard rolled his eyes and left for Penny’s apartment while Sheldon picked up the soiled cushion and raced to the washroom.

xTBBTx

“He still in his room?” Howard asked happily as he sat on the couch.

“Until the cushion comes back from the cleaners he says there’s nowhere for him to sit,” explained Leonard.

“Hel-lo Babylon-5!” cheered Raj as Leonard pressed play on the remote.

Inside his bedroom Sheldon scowled at the shot of joy as he lay reading a science journal on his bed.

“Every Who down in Whoville liked Babylon-5 a lot; but the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville, wanted a plot,” he mocked just as his phone rang. He checked who was calling and rolled his eyes as he answered.

“Hello mother.”

“Hello Shelly, how are yuh?”

“Fine I suppose, although my bowel movements have been irregular.”

“Sorry tuh hear that. So how’s things with Leonard? Yuh get that little thing settled between the two of yuh?”

“It wasn’t a ‘little thing’. He forgot to rinse the sink and that’s just asking for a bacterial frenzy in our kitchen.”

“But yuh lived.”

“Fortunately.”

“Ah Shelly, sometimes ah forget how special yuh are.”

“Why thank you, mother.”

“So how’s Penny?”

“I wouldn’t know. We don’t speak.”

“That’s not soundin’ too good. What happened?”

“June twenty third she violated the noise ordinance by—”

“Ah don’t need the criminal code cited tuh me. Ah take it she’s been violatin’ yuhr rules.”

“She stole my milk and wifi, sent me a joke email, touched an onion ring that was already on my plate, took the labels off my drinking glasses and put three paintballs on my couch cushion.”
“Don’t get yuhr cows runnin’. Take a breath. … That’s better. Now ah’m sure Penny didn’t get throwed off the truck so yuh must have done somethin’ tuh keep the fire burnin’.”

“I merely responded in kind.”

“Like?”

“Well, after she refused to apologize or take my course I forbid her to be in my apartment for a year. When she touched my onion ring I banned her from my wifi and after removing my drinking glass labels I hung her clothes from the telephone wire and—”

“Yuh what?!”

“Is there a problem with the connection?”

“There’s a problem alright. No wonder the girl ain’t talkin’ tuh yuh.”

“The feeling is quite mutual.”

“Shelly yuh’re all hat an’ no cattle. Now yuh go over there an’ make things right.”

“Why me? I wasn’t the one who—”

“Jesus isn’t with yuh when yuh don’t take personal responsibility.”

“Jesus isn’t with me at any time.”

“No sass, mister.”

“I’m sorry, mother.”

“Now Shelly ah know yuh haven’t had a lot of experience havin’ a friend but like ah explained tuh yuh before with yuhr roommate relationships are give an’ take. There’ll be things Penny does that irks yuh but I absolutely guarantee there are things yuh do that gets under her skin.”

“I don’t see what but go on.”

“The point is yuh don’t throw the baby out with the bath water. Yuh reconcile yuhr differences an’ go on from there.”

“But there are a lot of differences.”

“Then it means yuh’d better get started on the apologizin’ since the sun’s only up for so long.”

“She has to apologize first.”

“This ain’t a peein’ contest, Shelly. Yuh fix this or yuh’re gonna lose her.”

“That’s what Leonard said. How am I supposed to lose someone when she’s across the hall?”

“Yuh’d be surprised. Now go talk tuh her.”

“Alright. Although I’m doing this under duress.”

“Ahh don’t care if yuh’re doin’ this naked. Just get it done.”

“Fine. Goodbye mother.”
Sheldon hung up and gave a big-ass pouty face before getting out of bed. He put on his slippers and made his way to the living room.

“That’s Babylon-5,” he said to Leonard as he passed by the couch. “We agreed not to play it when I was present.”

“We didn’t agree to that, you just said so,” Leonard replied distractedly as he watched the show.

“No we had a vote at the weekly roommate meeting. Of course all ties are settled by me and so you lost but it was both procedural and democratic.”

“Well are you planning on staying?”

“No, I’m going to see Penny.”

“Maybe we should keep the door open,” smirked Howard. “This sounds infinitely more interesting than Babylon-5.”

Sheldon gave him a glare before stepping into the hall and firmly closing the door. He moved to Penny’s door and knocked and when she answered he took in her pig-tailed hair, pink low-cut top and scowl on her face.

“Yes?” she said evenly.

“If you could have any super power what would it be?”

“What?” She raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“It’s a conversation opener,” Sheldon clarified.

“Ah. How about one that ends this conversation?” she said in mock-seriousness causing her neighbor to purse his lips.

“Not the answer I was seeking but it does open a line of discourse.” He looked to Penny as he clasped his hands behind his back. “It has occurred to me that our friendship has been jeopardized by your actions.”

“My actions?” Penny said tersely.

“Exactly. Thank you for the acknowledgment. Now in the spirit of comradery I’m willing to overlook your transgressions—”

Penny folded her arms across her chest. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You stole my milk and wifi; you vandalized my seat cush—”

“Goodbye, Sheldon.” The Nebraskan took a step back to close her door. Immediately Sheldon put out a hand to stop her.

“Are you currently sharing in the triumph of some local sports team?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m conversing. It’s my understanding that when you have something awkward to discuss with someone it’s more palatable to preface it with banal chit chat,” Sheldon explained.

“So you’re just tossing in questions?” Penny rolled her eyes. “Un-boleevable.”
“Again, you’re responding,” he pointed out.

“Okay, how about this? You agree that you’re being an anal asshat”—here Sheldon’s mouth began to twitch—“and promise to lighten up and I’ll forgive you,” Penny said.

“Excuse me, but I’ve done nothing wrong,” he said crisply. “If anything I’ve been the victim of all your shenanigans.” He took in her cold look. “Now quit making this more difficult than it needs to be. As I said before, I’ll overlook your transgressions as long as you promise not to violate the criminal code or engage in frivolity against my person. Even with your meager educational background you can surely see that this is a simple matter to resolve.”

“You’re right,” Penny nodded. “This is really simple. You’re a jerk.”

She closed the door, leaving Sheldon alone in the hall.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Silence.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

More silence.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Sheldon, leave her alone,” Leonard said gently from their apartment doorway. “She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

The lanky physicist turned to his roommate.

“How are we supposed to resolve our differences if we don’t converse?” Sheldon said in a puzzled tone.

“Sometimes you can’t.”

“So she has unilaterally terminated our Friendship Agreement?”

“Looks like it.”

Sheldon looked to Penny’s door before returning his gaze to Leonard.

“That’s unacceptable,” he said firmly.

“That’s life,” Leonard said with a sympathetic smile. “Sometimes things don’t work out.”

“So does that mean we’ll no longer be friends at some point?” Sheldon asked quietly. To Leonard
his roommate looked like a little boy lost.

“We’ll be friends.” Leonard reached out a hand. “Come on, Sheldon.”

The two physicists entered their apartment and closed the door.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Indirect Fire

‘Every Who down in Whoville….”: Parody of ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ cartoon
Leonard heard Penny’s voice in the hall as he rode the elevator to his floor. It had only been five days since Penny told Sheldon to take a hike but for Leonard time seemed to have warped at apartment 4A. Howard and Raj did their best not to be douches as Leonard explained to Sheldon that the latter’s behavior contributed to Penny closing her door on the lanky physicist. Leonard still wasn’t sure if Sheldon ‘got’ it but over the past four days he’d been unusually quiet.

The doors opened and Leonard stepped into the hall to see Penny and Stuart waiting for the elevator.

“Hi guys,” he said amiably. “Date night, huh?”

“Yeah,” Penny smiled although it didn’t seem to reach her eyes. “Stuart’s exhibition is tonight and we thought we’d check it out.”

“Well it’s not my exhibition. I’ve got like one picture in it. It’s probably in a corner under a burned out bulb,” sighed Stuart.

“Hey, what did I say about doubting yourself?” Penny teased.

“‘Leave it to the experts’,” the comic store owner said with a tight smile.

“That’s right,” she said.

“Well, have a good night,” Leonard said and the pair entered the elevator.

Penny and Leonard looked at each other and the physicist could tell that she wanted to ask him about his roommate and he hoped he conveyed that Sheldon really missed her even though the lanky man was too much of an idiot to apologize.

The elevator doors closed.

Leonard shook his head and with a sigh turned the lock and opened the apartment door. Immediately his curiosity piqued as he noted Sheldon had set up three massive whiteboards, one of which was—

“Hey! That’s my whiteboard!” growled Leonard as he shut the door and sprayed the bottom of his shoes.

“Yes, well, as you weren’t using it—”

“I was close to working out how to detect gravitational waves, Sheldon!”

“No you weren’t. Your numbers were way off. The range of frequencies that could plausibly be detected range from ten to the negative seven Hz up to ten to the eleventh Hz. Anything outside that spectrum is unmeasurable,” sniffed Sheldon.
“I know; I was just seeing if we could stretch the parameters,” Leonard said defensively.

“Not with those numbers. The only thing you’re stretching with those is the realm of impossibility,” said Sheldon as he made a correction to his board.

“So what was so important that you had to commandeer the whiteboards?” Leonard said, still fuming.

“I’ve thought over what you’d said to me a few days ago and have come to acknowledge an inherent difficulty in bonding with people on my part.” Sheldon tapped the board with the capped marker. “So like any good scientist I’ve been conducting research to better understand how to rectify the situation.”

“Like saying, ‘I’m sorry’ and actually meaning it?” the shorter man asked sarcastically.

“Leonard, I need you to be serious,” Sheldon said with a frown.

“You’re right, I’m ca-razy.” Leonard folded his arms across his chest as he sat on the arm of the couch. “Okay, so what is all this?”

“My solution for rekindling my friendship with Penny.”

“Huh.” Leonard read over the flow chart. “Alright. So where did you get your data?”

“Well they didn’t have a direct ‘how-to’ manual so I had to extrapolate,” said Sheldon as he indicated a book on the coffee table. Leonard reached over and picked it up.

“‘Stu the Cockatoo is New at the Zoo’,” he read.

“It’s quite the page-turner,” Sheldon said enthusiastically. “My approach to Penny had similar deficiencies as those that plagued Stu the Cockatoo when he was new at the zoo. By isolating his trials into a simple flowchart I’ve come up with a method for reestablishing my friendship with Penny.”

“Well off the bat I can see something wrong with the plan,” Leonard said slowly. “Besides the fact neither of you are a cockatoo.”

“You’re being too literal, but go on.”

“Well all of this is predisposed on the idea that Penny is receptive to resuming your friendship. Stu was new at the zoo and so didn’t have the baggage associated with a previous friendship going down the drain. You do.”

Sheldon placed the marker on the ledge.

“I can’t see why Penny wouldn’t want to resume our friendship. I’m playful, intelligent, have a ruthless attention to hygiene and am an exceptional Java applet writer,” he said evenly. “Who could resist that?”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “‘Playful’? Uh, Sheldon, I don’t know if this is going to work.”

“I’ve gone through a great deal to accommodate Penny into my life.” Sheldon’s face became grave. “I have to try,” he said seriously. His roommate nodded slowly.

“Good luck,” Leonard said.

Sheldon clasped his hands behind his back and resumed studying his board.
The elevator door opened and Penny and Stuart emerged onto her floor.

"Thanks for coming, Penny," Stuart said. "It was nice having someone I know with me."

"Yeah, well that guy with the sweatpants from your store was there," she replied as she went to unlock her door.

"Well he at least wore a long-sleeved Captain American shirt so I suppose he didn’t stand out too badly. Of course it would’ve been nice if he didn’t touch all the cheese," he said drolly, causing Penny to laugh.

"Oh my God, I thought I was the only one to see that."

The door to 4A opened and Sheldon stepped into the hall.

"Good evening Stuart," he said amiably although his eyes were on Penny. "I see you’ve returned from your outing."

"Hey Sheldon," the comic store owner replied. "Yeah, I was just dropping off Penny."

"Right to my door just like a gentleman," Penny said with an enthusiastic smile although she looked to her neighbor.

"I see." Sheldon quickly went over the algorithm in his head. "You know Penny, it’s been five days since we’ve been in social contact and its occurred to me that my conduct might be at partial fault."

"Oh really?" Penny said sarcastically. "Do tell."

"When we last—spoke—I hadn’t offered any concrete suggestions for continuing our friendship. Perhaps the two of us could share a meal together?"

"I already ate," the waitress replied.

"I see. Well then perhaps you’d have time for a hot beverage? Popular choices include tea, cocoa —"

"Actually Stuart and I were just going in for a cup of coffee," Penny said pointedly.

"Isn’t it a little late in the evening for coffee?" asked Sheldon. "Perhaps an alternate beverage is in order given the hour and relatively short time the two of you have been acquainted." Penny’s mouth dropped. "Now back to the point at hand. I admit I'm inexperienced when it comes to the maintaining of friendships but Stu has pointed out to me that friendship is a two way street."

Penny looked to Stuart.

"It wasn't me," he said quickly.

"Who's Stu?" she asked Sheldon.

"A cockatoo."

"A cockatoo?"
"Yes, he's new at the zoo," Sheldon said dismissively. "Anyways, it's possible that some of my actions could be considered inappropriate if seen from a certain perspective."

"You mean like mine?" Penny said with a smirk.

"That's one perspective, yes. And similarly your actions towards me could be regarded as hostile--"

"LOLcats are hostile?"

"You touched my onion ring and then threw it back on the plate," Sheldon said with a frown.

"Yeah, that crossed the line," Penny admitted.

"Darn tootin'." Sheldon raised himself to his full height. "I'd like to think my friendship is worth more than free wifi or a boisterous late night cup of coffee with repugnant individuals." He regarded Stuart. "No offence."

"None taken," replied Stuart. "Although repugnant is a little harsh."

Penny was taken aback. "Oh my God, Sheldon, of course it is. You've just got to tone down the whackedness a bit. People will strike out from time to time. That's just how we are."

"So what am I supposed to do if you persist in antagonizing me?" Sheldon asked.

"What we're doing now. Talk."

"I didn't appreciate you taking the labels off my glasses and shooting my spot," he said.

"I didn't like being tossed from your apartment like trash," she replied.

Sheldon rolled his eyes. "Banning you from the apartment doesn't constitute tossing you like trash."

"You make it like everybody has to play by your rules or else," scowled Penny.

"All people have rules, Penny."

"Yeah, but not necessarily for the right reasons." She took in his pursed lips. "Look, I didn't know you hated LOLcats. I won't send them again. And I'll leave your milk alone."

"I don't mind the milk thefts so long as you acknowledge them so I can account for overall volume."

"You got it, boss." Pause. "I'm sorry about your cushion."

"I regret making your clothing a public spectacle," Sheldon countered.

“Yeah, maybe it's a little late for coffee,” said Stuart as he looked between Penny and Sheldon. "But I could sure go for a cup of tea."

“Yeah, I’ve got some tea,” Penny said with a pleased look on her face.

“Good. After all this excitement I require a hot beverage,” the physicist said.

“Why not?” Penny chuckled and took out her keys to unlock her door.
“You know, Stuart, I'm in the midst of a rip-roaring debate on the DC comics message board about who should replace Bat-Man in the event he dies or retires.”

“I think Jason Todd is the logical choice to be Bat-Man,” said Stuart.

“Interesting. Wrong, but interesting. Dick Grayson is the obvious successor.”

“Nanotechnology is interesting. Dick Grayson as Bat-Man is wrong,” countered Stuart firmly.

Sheldon’s eyes narrowed. “Prove it,” he said as he breezed by Penny and entered her apartment with Stuart in hot pursuit.

Alone in the hall Penny took in the two comic nerds as they argued in her living room. Up to this point she’d never heard Stuart sound authoritative although Sheldon’s arrogance clearly dwarfed the comic store owner. From the tone of his voice she could tell that Sheldon was deadly serious about the comic book babble. How someone who worked on the origins of the universe could get his tighty whities in a knot over who should be Bat-Man was absolutely mind boggling to her but then again she wasn’t a genius like Sheldon. *Or maybe ‘sooper genius’ like Wile E. Coyote….*

“Penny, aren’t you going to make tea?” said Sheldon, snapping her out of her reverie.

The Nebraskan quickly stepped inside and closed the door.

xTBBTx

“So where did you learn how to kite-fight?” asked Leonard as he watched his roommate position Raj’s authentic Patang fighting kite on the wall to the right of the closet.

“I grew up in Galveston, Leonard. The coast allows for excellent wind conditions for such things as kiteboarding.”

“Wow. Never knew you kiteboarded.” Sheldon paused in his work to regard his friend.

“Don’t be silly. That would require me getting wet.” He moved the kite wing a micro hair to the left and then stood back. “Ah, the spoils of war. Rajesh did a magnificent job putting the kite together.”

“He’s going to be pissed when he sees it mounted on the wall,” Leonard warned.

“I’m merely enacting the age-old custom of ‘to the victor goes the spoils’ or as the childhood ditty so cleverly summarizes: nee-ner-nee-ner-neeee-ner.”

The apartment door opened even as Penny knocked.

“Hey guys,” she said amiably.

“Let’s see, Leonard, we have a knock at the door, Penny entering our apartment and a greeting. Now unless one of us has Flash-like quickness and opened the door for her I’d say an important step was missed,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Penny said before sticking out her tongue. Sheldon, for his part, turned to his neighbor with an amused expression.

“Now that you’ve so eloquently expressed yourself shall we get down to the nature of your intrusion?”

“Well I heard that yesterday was the big day so I wanted to see how your cushion turned out,”
Penny said in a tone she hoped didn’t sound as nervous as she felt.

Immediately Sheldon’s face became serious.

“Ah.” He moved to the couch. “As you can see the stain has been removed.”

“That’s great!” Penny was relieved.

“However in the process the cushion’s density has been repositioned thus leaving my coccyx and buttocks in a state of discomfort.”

“Huh?” Penny looked to Leonard.

“He misses his butt-cheek dents in the cushion,” the short physicist grinned.

Penny shook her head in mirth.

“Anyhoo, I’m glad things turned out.” She dug into her pocket for two twenty dollar bills. “Listen Sheldon, since what happened was kinda my fault—”

“You shot my cushion three times at point-blank range, of course it’s your fault,” Sheldon said.

“Sheldon, be nice,” Leonard said warningly.

“Well it’s not like the cushion provoked her, Leonard,” Sheldon sniffed as he took up a container from the side table and proceeded to the door. “As you were saying, Penny?”

“Here’s forty bucks. If it doesn’t cover the cleaning just let me know how much more I owe you and—”

“Forty is fine. The rest is negligible.” Sheldon took in his neighbor’s look of relief before presenting her with the container. “Chocolate?”

“Thanks.” She took a chocolate and popped it into her mouth. “Wow, this is good!”

“I noticed your penchant for dark chocolate.”

“That a part of that ‘all-knowing physicist’ thing?” she teased.

“Something like that,” he said drolly.

“Hey, what’s that on the wall?” Penny indicated the kite with her eyes.

“It’s a Patang fighting kite,” said Leonard. “Sheldon won it from Raj in a duel this afternoon. You should see it.”

“Sure.” Penny slipped off her flip-flops and sprayed her feet.

“You can just spray your shoes and come in,” said Leonard. “Sheldon’s okay with it. Sort of.”

“I guess,” replied the waitress. “But it’s kinda habit by now so wearing them inside the apartment just feels weird, y’know?”

“I can understand ritual,” said Sheldon. “Have another chocolate.”

Penny popped one into her mouth and came towards a frowning Leonard.
“What?” she said.

“I’m not sure,” he replied as his eyes drifted inquiringly to Sheldon.

“As you can see the length of the top line to the tow point is the length between the two bridle to spine connection points here and here,” the lanky physicist pointed on the kite. “The length of the bottom bridle to the tow point is typically between half an inch to two inches longer than the length of the two spine connections. The spine of the kite has a slight convex curve toward the face of the kite.”

“Um, yeah,” said Penny with a little smile. “It’s obvious when you point it out.”

Two sharp knocks at the door before it opened and in came Raj and Howard wearing black clothing and tattoo sleeves. Howard’s outfit was spectacular with the amount of leather, pvc and spikes covering his body. Then there was the black eyeliner….

“Well if it isn’t Howard Gothowitz and Rajesh Spookrappali,” chuckled Leonard.

“We are Children of the Night out on the prowl,” Howard said slickly before looking to Penny with a raised eyebrow and making a playful ‘roar’.

“We had a dog that made a sound like that on the farm,” said Penny. “Had to put it down.”

Sheldon held out the container and she took a chocolate.

Immediately a dark look came to Raj’s face as he noticed his kite on the wall. He whispered furiously to Howard.

“Raj said he likes what you’ve done with the place,” the engineer quipped, garnering a slap on the arm. “Penny, I hate to bother you but I’m out of black eyeliner.”

“Yeah I think I’ve got some.” Penny took in Howard’s kickass leather platform boots. “You know it’d be simpler if you come to my place instead of taking off your boots.” She approached the engineer and slipped on her own foot apparel. “Besides, it’ll give Sheldon a chance to gloat over the kite.”

“Penny,” said Sheldon. The Nebraskan turned and opened her mouth as the physicist gently lobbed a chocolate in her direction.

“Thanks, Sheldon,” she said with her mouth full of chocolate before leaving the apartment with Howard.

“First of all, I formally object to you displaying my kite since it was taken under dubious circumstances,” Raj said icily.

“What are you doing giving Penny chocolate?” Leonard interjected.

“‘Dubious circumstances’,” scoffed Sheldon. “My Manjha clipped and downed your kite fair and square, not to mention with flair and skill.” His eyes flicked to his roommate. “You said be nice to Penny. I believe offering chocolate to someone falls within the definition of ‘nice’.”

Raj was steamed. “How was it fair? You had Leonard while I had a very sucky partner who left me for a good looking jogger.”

“You’re using chocolate as positive reinforcement for what you consider good behavior, Sheldon!” snapped Leonard. “You can’t train Penny like a lab rat!”
The lanky physicist shook his head derisively at the astrophysicist. “How is it my fault you relied on inferior assistance? As you pointed out I had Leonard and yet I persevered.”

“Hey!” said Leonard.

“Your anger is misdirected, Raj.” Sheldon held up the bowl. “Chocolate?”

“Thank you,” sulked Raj as he took a bite.

“Will you stop that!” Leonard growled. “You can’t bend people to your whim any time you want by waving a bowl of chocolate in the air.”

“Actually, it turns out I can,” Sheldon countered evenly. “If I’d known about the power of chocolate as an operant conditioning technique I could have saved myself all the endured hardship related to Penny altering my routines.”

Leonard gawked at his roommate.

“You’re something else,” he said with a disgusted look.

Sheldon seemingly looked taller. “I’ve always considered myself an extraordinary being, a homo novus if you will.”

“More of an ‘oi vey’ if you ask me,” snorted Raj. “Can I have another chocolate?”

“No,” Sheldon said firmly and walked to the side table to get the container cover.

“Look at the bright side, Raj, it’s less fattening disagreeing with Sheldon,” soothed Leonard.

“My hips agree with you but my tummy hates me right now,” sighed the astrophysicist.

xTBBTx

“So anyways Leslie’s off with Ron from the geology lab,” sighed Leonard as he slumped against Penny’s couch. “I mean it’s none of my business. Sure we were sexual partners but it’s not like we were anything other than friends with benefits.” He shrugged. “Okay, colleagues with benefits but it still doesn’t explain why I feel so damn hurt. I mean it’s not like this is the first time I dated Leslie. Sure she broke my heart the first time with her ‘Mama’s a rolling stone’ comment but I knew this time she wasn’t serious and yet I still fell for her.”

Penny smiled sympathetically and patted his thigh.

“ Probably because you’re not exactly a friends with benefits kinda guy, Leonard.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I liked the sex,” he said with a crooked smile.

“Yeah but you’re supposed to lead with your penis not your heart. Some people can do the friends with benefits and some can’t.”

“I guess.” He chuckled softly. “Although if you’re ever available to test that hypothesis….” She stuck out her tongue. “Thanks Penny, you’re awesome. I guess—” His phone rang out a Joker laugh.

“Man, that’s creepy,” Penny shuddered.

“Tell me about it,” Leonard muttered as he answered his phone. “Hello? … Ah. … No, no problem.” He hung up, looking crestfallen.
“What?” Penny asked, concerned.

“Guess Leslie dialed my number by mistake.”

Penny pursed her lips. “You should block her number.”

“No, she’s a colleague. Sometimes I have to coordinate labs with her,” he explained.

“Fine.” She took Leonard’s phone from his hand and turned it off. “Then until you get to Vegas this puppy’s out of service.”

“Fair enough. Speaking of which I better get a move on.” He got up and pocketed his phone before taking up his overnight bag. “Thanks again for listening.”

“Quit thanking me and go.” The came to the threshold of Penny’s apartment before the waitress gave him a hug. “Go get ’em, Tiger.”

“Whatever you say, Mary Jane,” the physicist replied cheerily before crossing over to his apartment and stuck in his head. “Sheldon, I’m off.”

No answer.

“Goodbye Leonard. Have a good time, Leonard,” the short man said to himself as he closed and locked the door. He hopped into the elevator and made his way to his car and an engineer and a sour-looking astrophysicist.

“What?” Leonard asked Raj.

“Howard’s been texting Leslie,” Raj replied. Leonard looked accusingly at Howard.

“I didn’t start it,” Howard explained. “Leslie’s a woman with needs and apparently she needs someone to soothe her.”

“But you told her you’re going to Vegas with me, right?” Leonard said icily as the trio got into his car.

“Well not in so many words.”

Raj was not impressed. “Howard….”

“Relax,” Howard said as he typed away. “I said my mother’s sick but that I’d be available tomorrow night.” A moment and then his phone chimed.

Leonard glared at him through the rear view mirror. “If you answer that you can forget about going.”

“Yeah, bros before hoes,” Raj agreed.

“Fine.” Howard turned off his phone and stuck it in his pocket.

“Penny was right, no phones until Vegas,” said Leonard. “Time to bond with my male cohorts and plan to conquer womankind.”

“That’s the spirit,” smiled Raj. “Time to get up, dust yourself off and get back on the hoes.”

Howard rolled his eyes while Leonard grinned and drove off.
“Boy that woman can blather,” tsked Sheldon as he came down the hall cleaning his hands with antibacterial cleanser. He’d thrown out the garbage and was heading back to the apartment when Mrs. Hamilton in 4C flagged him to get her kitchen curtain down. Mrs. Vartabedian happened to be there and it was what Sheldon felt a dog’s age until he managed to escape the conversation.

He put the cleaner back in his pocket and went to enter his apartment but the handle didn’t turn.

“Odd, it’s locked,” he murmured.

Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”
Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”
Knock Knock Knock “Leonard.”

No answer. Sheldon’s stomach dropped.

Knock! Knock! Knock! “Leonard!”
Knock! Knock! Knock! “Leonard!”

“Leonard’s gone,” Penny said as she opened her door. Sheldon was in a panic.

“What do you mean ‘gone’? He didn’t tell me he was going now!”

Knock! Knock! Knock! “Leonard!”

“Sorry sweetie, he left about fifteen-twenty minutes ago,” Penny said soothingly.

Sheldon sighed. “I’ll need the emergency key.”

“You said you wanted it back, remember?”

“Yes, and you didn’t give it to me,” he said with a scowl.

Penny smirked as she leaned against her doorframe. “I didn’t want to give it to you because you were being an ass but I did listen. I gave it back to Leonard the next day.”

Sheldon shook his head. “The one time you choose to listen to me….?” He felt his pants pockets for his phone. “Drat. You’ll have to call him.”

“That could be a problem.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t pay your phone bill,” he replied, garnering him a glare.

“Yes I paid my phone bill,” Penny said sarcastically. “I mean that he got a call from Leslie so I told him to turn off his phone until he hit Vegas.” Now it was Sheldon’s turn to scowl.

“Is there anything else you’ve done that could possibly make this any worse?” he said tersely.

“I suppose giggling at the sour look on your puss wouldn’t help, huh?” Penny said sweetly.

“We’ll have to call Raj or Howard,” he said stiffly as he marched past Penny into her apartment.

“Why come on in, Sheldon. Make yourself at home,” she said and closed her apartment door.
“Hardly. My ‘home’ doesn’t have dirty laundry on my living room furniture,” Sheldon sniffed.

Penny handed him her phone. “Call Raj first. I don’t want Howard to know my number.”

Sheldon dialed Raj. “Oh don’t worry about that. Howard already knows your number.”

“You told him?” she gasped.

“No, he hacked Leonard’s phone. … Hmm, Raj isn’t answering.” He dialed Howard’s number. A frown came to his brow. “Neither is Howard. Well this is a disaster.”

“It’s not that bad,” Penny soothed.

“Penny, I don’t have my keys, wallet or phone. It’s like I’ve been mugged.”

“Not true. You’d have takeout with you, remember?” She smiled at his glare. “Look just call the Super.”

Sheldon dialed. “Hello, this is Dr. Sheldon Cooper at 2311 North Los Robles, apartment 4A. Thanks to the verbosity of a neighbor and a lack of coordination on the part of my roommate I am locked out of my apartment. I can be reached at 626 756 1534.” He hung up and sighed.

“Well you might as well have a seat. It’s not like he’s gonna call in five seconds.”

“But I called the emergency line. He has to call back.”

Penny sat down on the couch. “The building on fire is an emergency. This is inconvenient.”

The physicist frowned. “Suppose I couldn’t access my medication? That constitutes an emergency.”

“Are you on any medication?”

“I’m using a prescription topical ointment for my acne.”

“Well if the Super calls and you tell him that he’ll believe you have special medication,” she quipped.

“Amusing,” Sheldon said through pursed lips. He looked around the apartment with distaste. “Your cleaning agents are in the bathroom?”

“Sheldon, you don’t have to clean my apartment every time you step in.”

“Cleaning will give me something constructive to do until the superintendant calls.”

“Yeah, I mean it’s not like we could talk or watch a movie or something,” Penny said with a roll of the eyes.

“Alright,” Sheldon said with a sarcastic tone. “Do you have anything constructive to say about trains, Star Trek, comic books or quantum physics?”

“No.” A sudden thought came to the Nebraskan. “But you are into time travel and stuff, right?”

“I’ve been know to dabble in ‘stuff’, yes,” mocked the physicist.

“Well I’ve got a time-travel flick we can watch.” She got up and went to the dvd player and opened it.
“Time travel is fascinating,” Sheldon gushed as he tentatively sat down in his chair. “It’s always interesting to see how the movie and television industry depict it. For instance, Doctor Who travels in what looks like a nineteen sixties police box when it’s in actuality a T.A.R.D.I.S. or ‘Time And Relative Dimensions In Space’.”

“Uh huh.” She found the movie and popped open the case.

“I already introduced you to the time machine from the movie, The Time Machine. Other common devices include objects like photographs in Red Dwarf, the Guardian of Forever time portal in Star Trek season one episode twenty eight, time holes in Time Bandits, motor vehicles such as Marty McFly’s Delorean or—”

“How about a time traveling mailbox?” she said as she sat on the couch and picked up the remote.

“Haven’t heard of that before.” He thought about it. “It would be annoying having one’s bills traveling back and forth in time.”

“Just shush and watch.”

He took in the weird smile on Penny’s face and turned to watch the film.

XxX

“So what’d ya think?” asked Penny as she turned off the television. “Sorry the copy’s a little off but it’s a bootleg and—”

“You actually broke the law in order to see this drivel?” scoffed Sheldon.

“Hey, it’s a good movie,” she countered albeit with a similar smile as earlier which Sheldon decided to label as ‘of a devilish nature’.

“‘Good movie’. Good Lord. Penny, the implausibility was endless. The very notion that—”

“The science wasn’t the point, Sheldon,” she said. “It was the relationship.”

“Science is always the point,” he countered. “Without science everything is chaos.”

“Oh really?” smirked Penny. “Okay genius, so how does science explain why we’re friends?”

“We have a Friendship Agreement,” he said simply, making his companion chuckle.

“Still haven’t decided if you like me, huh?”

“It’s difficult when you waste my time on films such as this.”

“Ah, it’s good for ya. Anyhoo, I’m starving.” She got off the couch and went to the kitchen.

“I’ve a hankering for paneer,” said Sheldon.

“What’s that?”

“An Indian cheese dish. We can always call Bombay Grill and order dinner. I’ll repay you as soon as Leonard gets home.”

“Yeah, well that could be a problem since I’m a little short on cash,” she said as she took out a pot and filled it with water.
“That’s alright. We can order accordingly. How much do you have?”

“Nothin’.” She put the pot on the stove to heat.

Sheldon dropped his jaw even as he stood. “How can you have nothing? Weren’t you paid yesterday?”

“Yeah, but the engine going out on my car really screwed me over,” she sighed. “I had to take some money from the rent to cover that and then my credit card maxed when I paid my phone bill so that nixes that.”

“How can you live like this?”

“It’s not this bad all the time,” she snapped. “It’s just that the Cheesecake Factory doesn’t always pay the bills.” She leaned against the counter. “When I started I was living with Kurt so things were okay.”

“So why don’t you procure other employment with higher wages?”

“Because this isn’t supposed to be for life, Sheldon,” she explained. “I’m just doing this until my acting career takes off.”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

“It’s going to,” she said adamantly.

Silence.

“So what are you going to do now?” Sheldon asked. Penny shrugged.

“Well everything’s been cut except my phone and hydro—by the way I might have to use your stove for a few days.”

“This is hardly sound planning,” Sheldon tsked.

“I know.” Penny again sighed. “This wasn’t supposed to happen this way, y’know?”

“Actually, all of your preceding choices have led you to this moment in linear time.”

She snorted in amusement. “I wish I could undo some of them like meeting Kurt.”

“You said you came out to California with him. If not for his company you might not have and then you’d never have met and befriended…people that you currently know,” Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth even as he averted his eyes.

“Yeah, good people,” Penny smiled. “Well if I can’t change the big stuff at least I wish I had my fourteen hundred bucks back.”

“Your engine needed to be fixed.”

“Not from the car I mean from Kurt.” Sheldon looked at her questioningly. “He had a bunch of tickets and I paid them off so he wouldn’t go to jail.”

“And he’s never paid you back.”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘P’.
“You can always take him to small claims court but of course that does nothing to mitigate your current predicament.” He cocked his head. “I can give you a microloan.”

Penny immediately felt awkward. “Thanks sweetie but I can’t take your money. You’re rebuilding your savings, remember?”

“It’s just sitting in my apartment,” he pressed. “As things stand you’ve cut just about every expense so you’re out of options.”

Penny looked sad. “Yeah, I suppose I’ll have to look for a cheaper place to live.”

“No,” he said firmly, surprising her. “That’s an extreme overreaction. What you need is a chance to reorganize financially and an interest free loan will give you that opportunity.”

“I don’t know when I can pay you back,” she said shyly.

“When you can. It’s impossible to pay me back any sooner,” he said evenly.

“Thank you,” Penny said. Sheldon nodded. “Okay, so we’ve got two choices: mac and cheese with a little butter and no milk or else pasta with butter and a sprinkle of cheese powder.”

“Surprise me,” he said drolly.

She smiled and went to the cupboard for the pasta box.

XxX

Penny sat on the couch watching Sheldon as the latter continued tidying up her living room.

“I dunno, are you Star Trek?” she sighed. Immediately Sheldon stopped and straightened.

“How can I be an entire franchise?” he said disgustedly. “For your information I was Spock.”

“Oh, well, that was my second guess,” she smirked before taking a sip of iced water. “My turn.”

Sheldon resumed cleaning. “Alright. Are you human?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, well that rather narrows it. Are you female?”

“No.”

“Are you an entertainer?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a musician?”

“Yes.”

“Are you alive?”

“Yes.”

“Would I find your music irritating?”
Penny giggled. “Most definitely.”

“Are you a solo act?”

“I am now.”

“Hmm. A male mainstream musician who was formally group affiliated.” Sheldon snorted. “Well the answer is obvious: you’re no one of significance.”

“You should talk,” Penny countered. “At least Justin Timberlake is real unlike your Spock.”

Again Sheldon turned to his neighbor. “For your information Spock has been responsible for several songs such as George Duke’s ‘Spock Gets Funky’ and ‘Vulcan Mind Probe’, Paul Gilbert’s ‘Mr. Spock’ and who could ever forget Leonard Nimoy’s portrayal of Spock in the song ‘Highly Illogical’ in which Spock points out the foibles of human thought such as relationships, automobiles and greed.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “So what does he have to say about relationships?”

“Girl meets boy they fall in love; She says he's everything she's dreamed of; But when they get married before he's aware; She changes his habits the way he combs his hair; She changes him to someone he's never been; And then complains he's not like other men; Now really I find this most illogical.”

“Whatever,” Penny said as she took in Sheldon’s smug look. “Everyone changes when they’re a couple, Sheldon.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said adamantly. “Of course the whole topic is moot since I’ll never be pair-bonded.”

Penny was inexplicably disappointed. “Really? I mean what if you found a lady-Spock?”

“If she was in any way like Spock she’d know that a romantic relationship is an unnecessary cultural construct that adds no value to human relationships,” he said casually.

“Yeah just you and good ol’ physics,” Penny mumbled before taking another sip of water.

“Actually I see it more as my Nobel Prize and me.”

“And Star Trek.”

Sheldon was impressed. “There’s hope for you yet.”

“And I’ll quit while I’m ahead.” She got off the couch. “Okay, enough cleaning and time for bed. I’ll get you a blanket and pillow.”

“You expect me to sleep on the floor?” he gasped.

“On the couch, silly.”

Sheldon shook his head derisively. “Penny even if it was possible for me to pretzel myself so as to fit onto your couch while maintaining lumbar support I’d still be uncomfortable.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“You’ve got a bed.”
“Why Sheldon, are you saying you want to get into my bed?” Penny said coyly.

“I believe I just said that,” he replied, slightly confused.

“Yes, I know sweetie,” she chuckled. “Come on.”

Sheldon followed her before stopping at the door of her bedroom. He wrinkled his nose as he stared at the clothes on the floor.

“You’re gonna have to get in here sooner or later,” she warned. He entered and she turned back the covers and fluffed the pillow. “There ya go, all primped for your stay, monsieur.”

“Docteur.” She stepped back to let him at the bed. He bit the inside of his cheek as he tried to figure out the best way to tackle the situation. A hand tentatively reached for the blankets before quickly retreating. He turned to sit only to suddenly straighten as if stung on the buttocks. His eyes flicked to Penny and caught her scowl.

“It’s clean,” she said testily.

“Did you sleep here last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it isn’t clean.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Ya wanna try the floor?”

Sheldon pulled the sheet and blanket over the pillow. He gingerly sat down on the bed and bounced on it to test the mattress making Penny roll her eyes. He took off his shoes and slid in between the blanket and the comforter and pulled the latter up to his chin.

“Sing Soft Kitty to me,” he said quietly with wide blue eyes.

“You’re not sick,” Penny countered.

“Homesick is a kind of sick.”

“How can you be homesick?” she said incredulously. “You live just across the hall.”

“I miss my Saturday pajamas and cup of warm milk and my comic message board and the regularity of normally clockwork bodily functions.” He looked at her earnestly. “I didn’t poop tonight.”

Penny sat on the bed trying hard to conceal her smile. “Are you afraid of the dark too?”

“I’m not a child,” he sniffed. “Now sing.”

“Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur; happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr purr purr.” He gave a little sigh and she got up. “‘Night Sheldon.”

“Penny.” She turned to him. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

“You’re welcome sweetie.” She closed the door part of the way and Sheldon turned his head to look at the blue goldfish in the bowl until his eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

xTBBTx
Leonard exited the elevator with a wide grin on his face. Las Vegas was great with its free drinks, three ninety five all you can eat shrimp and the lovely Michaela. He sighed wistfully. He’d have to get Howard and Raj a kickass Christmas and Hanukah present this year.

He unlocked his door just as Penny’s door opened and Sheldon emerged.

“Thank goodness you’re back!” the lanky physicist said.

“Why?”

Sheldon brushed past Leonard into the apartment. “We’ll go over the proper procedure for leaving on overnight excursions. Needless to say first on the list should be ensuring that your roommate has keys to the apartment.”

“Geez, sorry about that,” said Leonard as he entered and set his overnight bag to the right of the door. “I thought you were here when I left.”

“I was taking out the garbage before being accosted by Mrs. Hamilton and Mrs. Vartabedian.” Sheldon took a can off the shelf and turned away from Leonard. There’s a ‘pop’ and two paper snakes sprang out of the can.

“Well at least Penny was home,” Leonard said, trying to be positive about the situation.

“As being at Penny’s home entailed eating semi-macaroni and cheese, watching a deplorable ‘chick flick’ before settling between two blankets covered in Penny’s sloughed skin cells your attempt at a silver lining fails dramatically,” countered Sheldon.

“You could have spent it in the garbage room.”

“Point.” Sheldon put the can back on the shelf and proceeded to the side table to take the container of chocolate. “I swear Leonard my life has been a series of inconveniences the moment I acquired friends.”

“Where are you going with the chocolates?” Leonard didn’t mention the money in his roommate’s hand since Sheldon was attempting unsuccessfully to be private as to its location.

“I’m paying Penny for her benefits,” Sheldon explained as he headed across the hall. Leonard puzzled over this even as he made to stand in the doorway of their apartment.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

A moment and then a pink housecoated Penny opened the door. “Oh, hey, you’re up.”

“Obviously. Here.” He handed her the money.

“What’s this?”

“Fourteen hundred dollars.”

Penny blanched. “Sheldon I can’t—”

“We agreed to the loan last night. Pay me when you’re able.”
“Thanks Sheldon,” she smiled.

“You’re welcome.” He held out the container. “Chocolate?”

“Thank you.” She took one and popped it into her mouth. Sheldon smiled awkwardly and disappeared into his apartment.

“You do realize Sheldon gives you chocolate to reward you for doing things his way,” Leonard said with a smirk.

“Yup, but it’s free chocolate,” she winked in response. “So how was Vegas?”

“What happens in Vegas….?”

“You dog!” Leonard pumpkin grinned. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, good for me.” The neighbors smiled at each other before Leonard entered his apartment and closed the door.

“Leonard, I have to amend our showering arrangement,” said Sheldon as he came down the hall holding a towel and bathrobe. “I’m invoking Section seven, the right to enter the bathroom in emergency situations.” Leonard couldn’t help himself.

“How is a shower an emergency?” he asked innocently.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “We wouldn’t be having this conversation if I had tangled with a skunk.”

“You didn’t tangle with a skunk, you slept at Penny’s.”

“Now you’re quibbling.” Sheldon turned on his heel and marched into the washroom.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Fighter Kite; Spock

Lyricsfreak: Highly Illogical
The Friendship Premium


xtBBTx

Leonard was relaxing in his stuffed chair watching Voyageur on the SyFy channel when Sheldon came down the hall wearing his bus pants and carrying his windbreaker.

“Where ya going?” Leonard asked.

“To Kurt’s place,” replied Sheldon as he slipped on his shoes.

“Who’s Kurt?”

“Penny’s ex-boyfriend.”

Immediately Leonard muted the show and focused on his roommate.

“Wanna catch me up here?” he said.

“Penny’s ex-boyfriend borrowed a sum of money from her and has refused to give it back.”

“And you think he’s just going to give it to you?”

Sheldon tied his shoes. “I managed to secure Penny’s television in our first exchange.”

“That’s amenable of him.”

“Well to be fair he was on the verge of assaulting me the second time we met. Fortunately Penny arrived to halt the altercation.”

The short physicist turned off the television. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Leonard, Penny is my friend and is in desperate need of money.” Sheldon put on his jacket and grabbed his keys from the bowl. “As much as I’d love to extend this conversation I have a series of buses to catch. I have to be at Kurt’s before eight pm as security typically needs to arrive at a bar around nine.”

“Wait, you mean Kurt’s a bouncer?” gasped Leonard.

“Yes. Goodbye.” Sheldon opened the door.

“Wait!” Leonard got off the chair. “Let me drive you.”

“That would be appreciated,” said Sheldon.

Leonard slipped on his shoes and the two men left the apartment.

XxX

“So what’s the plan?” asked Leonard as Sheldon and he walked towards Kurt’s door.

“It’s not complicated. Either we get the money from Kurt or else he signs the promissory note I
“drafted,” replied Sheldon as he patted his jacket pocket.

“What if he opts for option three?”

“What option three?” Sheldon questioned.

*He pounds us into the ground.* “Kurt doesn’t answer the door.”

Sheldon shook his head derisively. “Of course he’ll answer the door. He’s socially obligated to answer when someone knocks.” Leonard gave a little sigh but said nothing.

They arrived at the door and Sheldon made to knock before turning to Leonard.

“Stand a little to my right so he can see I’ve got backup,” he said with a bit of a nervous twang.

“Oh yeah, I’m the ‘muscle’,” Leonard snorted.

“Actually with your limited upper body strength you’d function better as a decoy,” said Sheldon before turning to the door.

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

Knock Knock Knock “Kurt.”

The door opened and Leonard’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he took in what had to be the most muscular human being he’d ever seen outside of an action flick or the wrestling ring.

“What the hell do you want?” growled Kurt.

Sheldon stood straight. “It’s not a question of what I want rather than what you have.”

“Perhaps now isn’t the time to quibble about semantics,” Leonard said nervously.

“Point,” said Sheldon. “Kurt, Penny had loaned you fourteen hundred dollars so you could pay off your tickets and avoid jail. She’s now in need of said money and wants it returned.”

Kurt folded his meaty arms across his massive chest. “So why isn’t Penny here asking?”

“She shouldn’t have to be asking, here or otherwise,” Sheldon replied, sidestepping the question. “It’s your obligation for you to rectify.”

“And what if I decide to wreck something else?” the bouncer said menacingly. Leonard, for his part, took a step back but to his credit remained at the scene.

“As long as what you destroy belongs solely to you what you choose to do is your prerogative,” Sheldon replied evenly although he did begin calculating how fast he’d have to run in order to outdistance Leonard down the hall. “Now, you have three choices: pay me now, sign a promissory note or else face litigation in small claims court.”

“Why it is every time we meet you seem to be threatening me with the cops?” Kurt said icily.

“Perhaps it’s because you seem to lack the reason to figure out the difference between legal and illegal acts.”

Leonard winced. “Sheldon....”
“Well I don’t have the cash on me,” the bouncer said.

“The acknowledgement of the debt will suffice,” said Sheldon as he pulled out the folded paper and a pen from his pocket. “It details your commitment to pay back the loan within sixty days unless you make some other arrangement with Penny. Failure to do so will result in litigation.”

Kurt took the proffered document and scanned its contents.

“I could sign this or tell you to piss off,” he concluded.

“I assure you we’ll meet again in court,” Sheldon said stiffly.

“This is Penny’s problem.” Kurt narrowed his eyes. “Quit making it yours or else I’ll give you a problem.”

“And I’ll give the judge a deposition detailing your threatening behavior.”

“Sheldon…” Leonard whined.

“Leonard, the man and I are conversing. Now as I was saying—”

A smirk came to Kurt’s face. “Before I sign this I want something.”

“Well I won’t pay you money in order to collect money if that’s what you’re suggesting,” tsked Sheldon.

“I want your pants.”

Sheldon was confused. “But they won’t fit you.”

“Yeah but I kinda like them.”

“My mother bought them for me.”

“Aww, isn’t she sweet,” Kurt said. “Your pants or else you can forget about this.”

“Well, we tried,” said Leonard, relieved that this nightmare was about to end.

Sheldon glared at Kurt before he undid his belt.

“What are you doing?” gasped Leonard to his roommate.

“This isn’t my first pantsing and will most likely not be my last,” muttered Sheldon as he slid out his belt and coiled it.

“But this is insane!”

“No, insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly hoping for a different result. Giving Kurt my pants is giving me the desired result so it isn’t ‘insane’,” Sheldon emptied the contents of his pockets into his coat before dropping his pants to the floor and revealing another pair of pants.

“Besides, my mother had me tested.” He freed his feet, picked up his pants and proceeded to fold them. “My apparel.”

Kurt took them with an amazed look on his face. Sheldon held out the pen and Kurt signed the note.
“As a notary public rest assured I’ll formally file this document.”

“Whatever.” Kurt handed back the note and closed the door, leaving Sheldon and Leonard in the hall.

“He didn’t give me back my pen,” said Sheldon after a moment.

Before he could knock Leonard grabbed him by the arm and began dragging him down the hall.

“I’ll get you a new one,” the shorter physicist said adamantly.

XxX

“You never told me you were a notary public,” Leonard said to Sheldon as the two men rode the elevator to their floor.

“Having the ability to draw up legal contracts as needed was a childhood dream of mine,” the lanky physicist replied.

“I never could have guessed,” smiled Leonard as he thought over the Roommate Agreement.

“Your limited powers of observation have been noted.”

“As has your inability to detect sarcasm.”

“Fair enough.” The shorter man bit his lip to keep from smiling.

The elevator doors opened just as Penny and Stuart were exiting her apartment.

“Hey guys,” she said amiably. “What’s new?”

“My bus pants,” said Sheldon as he held up a shopping bag from Sears.

“Something happen to the old ones?”

“Yes. They were”—his mouth twitched—“soiled beyond repair.”

“Well if you want I’ve got some Stain Away in my apartment,” Penny offered.

“That’s alright.” Sheldon’s right eye blinked rapidly. “It also has a tear.”

“Oh. Well this girl I know at the Cheesecake Factory is a sewer. She hems my dresses so I’m sure she could fix your pants.”

“She could…..” Sheldon stammered, his anxiety making his arms twitch and hands clench and unclench. His blinking became pronounced as was the twitching of his mouth.

Leonard noted his roommate’s distress. “There was a sale at Sears and Sheldon thought it easier to buy a new pair than fix the old ones,” he explained.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” said an unconvinced Penny.

“Penny, we’re going to be late for the movie,” Stuart said gently. “Unless you’re waiting for the lights to go down so no one will see you with me at the theater.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “Oh my God no, Stuart.” She tucked her arm through his and dragged
him into the elevator.

“Have fun,” Leonard said amiably as the doors closed. He let out a big breath and turned to unlock the apartment door. “What a night.”

Sheldon stepped past him into the apartment, slipped off his shoes and sprayed his sock feet. He then marched to the hall before stopping and turning around.

“Leonard, I’m sorry for involving you in this near debacle,” he said evenly. “We could have been hospitalized.”

“It’s okay. I kind of feel like your minstrel,” Leonard grinned.

Sheldon shook his head. “I have no idea what’s gotten into me. Perhaps I should schedule a physical,” he muttered to himself as he disappeared around the corner.

Leonard got himself a bottled water from the refrigerator and made to follow his roommate when a thought stopped him. He went to Sheldon’s whiteboard, took up a marker and, after gathering what he was thinking, began to draw out a flow chart of his own.

XxX

“Sorry about the movie,” Stuart apologized between forkfuls of linguini.

“No, it’s my fault. I took too long getting ready,” Penny replied. “Besides, this is a nice place.” It was a simple hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant but it was homey with the red bricked walls, soft lighting and music.

“Yeah, I found it when I was tired of home cooking aka ‘eating from a can’ and wanted something that wouldn’t break the bank.” Penny laughed.

“Well as my bank’s broken I appreciate it. The fettuccine is awesome. I don’t know what I’d do without pasta.”

“At this point I don’t think my metabolism can process unrefined foods anymore,” quipped Stuart. “I guess I’m living my parents’ premonition of being a starving artist.”

Penny’s finger traced the rim of her wine glass. “Yeah, my folks weren’t impressed about my leaving the farm to come out here to act.”

“How’s that going?”

“Well I was in a one night review of Rent. Probably set my career back two years and considering I don’t have a career right now means I’m up the creek,” she said wryly.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re attractive and personable. Believe me when I say that a lot of women don’t combine the two,” Stuart said kindly before taking a bite of his pasta.

“Thanks,” she said and took a sip of the house wine. It was a cheap but zingy beast that fit the pasta perfectly. “Still not everything’s doom and gloom for us. My agent’s still scouring the countryside for gigs and you own your own business.”

“And several loans to Bank of America.”

“But you love it,” she pressed.

“I live in a one room apartment with a stray cat.”
“Yeah, but you haven’t closed your shop.”

“It gives me somewhere to stay where I won’t be ticketed for loitering.” Stuart caught her ‘yeah right’ smirk and gave a small one of his own in return.

Penny took a bite of her fettuccine. “So what was your plan after leaving art school?”

“Become a comic book artist. I wanted to be like Jim Lee or Todd McFarlane and spend my time drawing and being paid to attend comic book conventions.” Stuart shrugged. “Instead I sell their comics and wait in line for their signatures.”

“I constantly read magazines with actors on the cover so I can imagine living in their mansions and attending the Oscars and meeting other actors.”

“You could introduce me to Hugh Jackman and Famke Janssen.”

“Why them?”

“They were in the X-Men movie franchise.”

“I notice there’s been a lot of comic book movies,” said Penny. “It’s amazing how much money they make.”

“Comic books are lucrative,” explained Stuart. “More wine?” he asked as he picked up the bottle to top off his glass.

“Thanks.” She watched him pour. “But comics are for kids and guys who never grew up.”

“Not true,” Stuart countered adamantly. “Neil Gamain’s Sandman number nineteen won a Nebula award for best fantasy short story and that beat out traditional books.”

“Huh.” Penny thought back to what she had read while waiting in line to get Sheldon’s comic signed. “Sounds a lot different than the stuff Stan Lee was writing with Spider-Man.”

“Stan Lee’s responsible for the beginnings of the modern Marvel Universe. He brought angst and down to earth qualities to the hero. Peter Parker was refreshing because he was a nerdy high school science geek who had doubts and personal tragedy but he never let that stop him from becoming the hero he became.” At once Stuart seemed to sit taller in his chair. “With great power comes great responsibility.”

“All that from a comic book? No wonder Sheldon reads them.”

Here Stuart smiled. “Sheldon’s an interesting man. About one lab accident away from being a supervillain.” Penny laughed. “Don’t laugh, it’s amazing how many supervillains hold doctoral degrees.”

“Believe me after seeing Sheldon without a job for a few weeks I can totally see the mad scientist shtick working for him,” she said with a grin.

“He may harbor plans for world domination but he’s a damn good customer—and he brought you into my store.” Stuart’s gaze went to her eyes. “None of this would be happening without Sheldon.”

“Yeah,” Penny said and took a large gulp of wine.
Sheldon came down the hall with a hankering for chamomile tea. His temperature was normal as was his bowel movement and yet he seemed out of sorts: his abdominal muscles kept contracting giving him an uncomfortable feeling and his mind seemed particularly muddled as he kept replaying meeting Penny and Stuart in the hall.

He went to the kitchen and filled the kettle with water and set it to heat on the stove. Another thought, this time of Kurt filling the doorframe with his bulk, and the physicist shook his head. This was twice he’d risked himself physically for Penny. Normally Sheldon considered himself a cautious sort but it seemed that friendship left him open to harm.

“I’m surprised having friends doesn’t increase one’s personal insurance rates,” he muttered while getting out the loose tea and caddy. As he placed them on the counter it dawned on him that there was a whole mess of something scrawled on his whiteboard.

Frowning, Sheldon came around the counter and took a look at the flowchart Leonard had drawn:

‘Penny’ it was titled and in the first box was: ‘Do you know her? Y or N?’

“Yes,” said Sheldon and looked at the next box.

‘Is she in your friend group? Y or N?’

“Yes.”

‘Do you talk with each other? Y or N?’

“Of course.”

‘Would it be weird to ask her what she’s doing later this week/weekend? Y or N?’

“No.” Sheldon’s eyes followed the arrow to the last big box.

‘ASK PENNY OUT’

Sheldon’s stomach did a flip as he mulled.

“Out where?” he said at last. With a shake of the head he took his eraser and cleaned the board.

XxX

The front seat of the little hatchback was a mess of two bodies smushed together with the sounds of kissing and minor groans overwhelming the light jazz coming over the car radio.

“Penny,” gasped Stuart between kisses.

“Shh,” she said as her nails raked across the back of his neck. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was doing; all she knew was that she needed to concentrate. It had been a while since she’d been intimate with anyone and Penny was convinced she was going crazy. It had even gotten to the point where she began thinking about—

*“Of course the whole topic is moot since I’ll never be pair-bonded.”*

Normally she’d have her groove on with Gwen and cruise the bars but instead she spent her time at 4A watching movies and eating dinner almost as if she were dating—
"If she was in any way like Spock she’d know that a romantic relationship is an unnecessary cultural construct that adds no value to human relationships."

Stuart’s lips went to Penny’s neck and kissed their way to her shoulder.

“Penny,” he sighed again.

“Sheldon,” came her breathy reply.

Immediately the pair froze before Stuart leaned back to take in Penny’s ‘o’ mouth and wide eyes.

“Well at least you didn’t say you were a dude,” he said after a moment.

“Yeah,” she said, still in shock. “All girl here.”

Stuart settled himself in the driver’s seat and started the car.

“I’d best get you home since I’ve got a long night ahead of me finding a rock to hide under,” he said in his usual self-deprecating tone.

“I’m sorry, Stuart. I just—I mean I don’t know what the hell I was saying,” Penny stammered.

“Don’t worry about it.” He put on his seatbelt and set the car in motion. “A lot of people get Stuart and Sheldon mixed up. I mean they both begin with ‘s’. What up with that?” he said lightly, hoping to take the awkwardness from the scene.

Penny gave a pained smile and put on her seatbelt.

xTBBTx

"This is a nightmare." Howard flumped back on the couch and closed his eyes.

“You look flushed,” Raj said to his friend.

“Ha ha,” the engineer said with a sneer. “It isn’t your career swirling down the toilet.”

Sheldon looked up from the Wolowitz Zero-Gravity Waste Disposal System which sat where his coffee table had been.

“Unlikely Howard.”

Howard cocked his head in surprise. “Why thank you, Sheldon.”

“This baby couldn’t keep anything down,” the physicist said evenly as he got to his feet. “That’s sarcasm.”

“Yeah, I got it,” growled Howard.

Raj clapped his friend on the shoulder. “Don’t give up, dude.”

“Perhaps we could prop up the ‘Y’ joint with the two inch PVC tubing,” offered Sheldon.

“It’d work for basic poops but it’d be one bad cramp away from disaster,” countered Howard.

Leonard came down the hall talking on his phone.

“No, I’m not putting this off. … Of course I want you to come. … No I’m not exhibiting
compliant submissive behavior just to please you.”

“Ah, must be his mother,” said Sheldon with a smile. “What a remarkable woman.”

“You’ve met her?” asked Raj as he took a slice of pizza from the box.

“We correspond via email and have Skyped several times. She’s a psychiatrist and neuroscientist so naturally she’s intrigued by my superior brain.”

Raj snorted. “Better watch it or she’ll slice it up so she can look at it under the microscope.”

“Who wouldn’t want to?” replied Sheldon.

“Right about now it’d be nice if you could use your brain and help me with this,” sighed Howard as he sat up and stared at his space toilet.

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Yes, mother. … You can stay in my room. … No, this isn’t me trying to rekindle mother-infant bonding. I’ll sleep on the couch. … Very well. Goodbye mother.” He hung up and gave a deep sigh before tucking the phone in his jacket pocket.

“So how’s mommy dearest?” asked Raj.

“Emotionally damaging as always,” replied Leonard as he came over and slumped into his stuffed chair. “She has a conference in L.A. so she thought she’d stay here for the weekend.”

Sheldon beamed. “Why that’d be delightful.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said in a less than enthusiastic tone. “It won’t be until the eighteenth so we’ve got time to organize the place and buy lots of aspirin and antacids.”

At this Sheldon was appalled. “You’re not anticipating your mother bringing some type of pathogen into the apartment are you?”

“Depends. Does a cloak of despair and self-loathing count?”

“Speaking of despair,” prompted Howard.

“What if we just ran another line to bypass the junction?” offered Raj.

“It won’t work. The diameter of the tubing is insufficient,” said Sheldon.

“It’ll be the first time mother’s staying at my apartment,” mused Leonard. “I mean it isn’t like I never offered before.” He glanced at his roommate. “Maybe it isn’t me she wants to see. Maybe it’s you.”

“Of course she wants to see me,” murmured Sheldon absently as he stared at the limited pool of parts available to fix the toilet. “Who wouldn’t?”

“Anyone sane?” said Raj garnering a glare. “What if we reposition the collection tank?”

“There’s no way to mount it,” sighed Howard.

“I was never good enough for her,” Leonard blurted. “Always the ‘needy baby, greedy baby’ when all I ever wanted was for her to say she loved me and mean it.” He looked up to see his friends staring at him.

“I stand corrected, Howard,” said Sheldon. “If Leonard can seemingly function as damaged as he
is we can surely fix your toilet.”

The engineer snapped his fingers. “Hang on. Help me see if we can wedge a little piece of PVC behind the support rod.”

Sheldon shook his head. “I don’t recommend—”

“Sheldon, I have a Masters degree in engineering. Cut me some slack, will you? Now hold this up.”

“Alright.” Sheldon and Raj went to either side of the toilet and rocked it forward. “Although I’d like to point out that it’s your Masters degree that’s brought you—”

“Not now, Sheldon,” said Leonard.

“You know, I realize this is Howard’s career on the line but otherwise this is fun,” gushed Raj with a grin. “We should get together and build something.”

Leonard perked up. “Actually the Southern California Robot Fighting League Round Robin Invitational’s coming up. Why not build a robot for that?”

“Okay, set it down,” said Howard and Raj and Sheldon eased the toilet back in place. “See? It held.”

“For now,” Sheldon said dubiously.

“All I need is for it to last six months and I’m in the clear,” said Howard happily. “I send up the replacement parts and voila, all is good in the world.” He unwrapped his mother’s meatloaf and dropped it in the toilet and flushed. There was a pause as it worked before the meatloaf launched to the ceiling.

“Maybe we should enter the space toilet into the competition,” Raj chuckled.

“This is a strike,” Sheldon said as he stared at his ceiling.

xTBBTx

The elevator doors opened and Penny stepped out carrying her empty laundry basket. Thanks to an overly expressive one year old with a spoonful of spaghetti sauce Penny’s uniform was a disaster and in need of immediate SOS as soon as she got home from work.

She noted that the door to 4A was open and she quickly averted her eyes so she wouldn’t attract attention.

“Penny!” Leonard called.

*Damn.* She ventured over with a plastered smile to see the gang working away at some kind of robotic thing-a-ma-jig.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“That’ is a Mobile Omnidirectional Neutralization and Termination Eradicator,” sniffed Sheldon as he sat in his spot reading over the schematic.

“A what?”

“We call him M.O.N.T.E.,” Leonard clarified.
“‘Him’, huh?” smirked Penny. “Wasn’t there something in the lease about not creating new life forms in the apartment?”

“Of course not,” said Sheldon. “Otherwise fornication would be forbidden.”

“You can always have sex with contraceptives, Sheldon,” amended Howard.

Sheldon snorted. “But what would be the point?” He returned to the schematic, ignorant of the gawking in his direction.

“Anyways,” Leonard said with a shake of the head. “We were going to order Indian food and wanted to know if you’d like some.”

“Umm no thanks,” said Penny. Sheldon turned towards his neighbor.

“I can pay for your meal as thanks for letting me stay at your apartment,” he said.

“You don’t have to,” she replied. “I mean we’re friends, right? It was my pleasure.”

“Nevertheless I’d like to reciprocate to maintain our neutrality.”

“Yeah, but look how busy you are,” Penny said with mock enthusiasm. “I’d hate to interrupt.”

“We have to stop working to eat.”

“Eyah.” She looked at her friend’s earnest face. It wasn’t his fault she said his name in Stuart’s car. It was the two bottles of wine—and that’s the story she was going to stick with. “Sure. Okay.”

“Penny a single positive acknowledgement will suffice.” Sheldon went back to his schematic. “What would you like?”

“Something vegetarian but otherwise surprise me.”

“Given my unfamiliarity with your gastric system I’m loathe to arbitrarily choose an item.”

“Just get something extra for me and add it to the communal pot,” Penny sighed.

“‘Communal pot’. What do you think this is, a hippy gathering?” snorted the lanky physicist.

Penny blanched. “I just assumed we’d be sharing, y’know, since we’re all friends and have to eat together.” Sheldon made to speak. “Of course we can have individual dishes, too. I mean why not? It’s not like any of us are together or anything so we can eat however we wish, right? Right.” She gave an awkward smile and left.

“That was odd,” said Leonard.

“What, that Sheldon bought her dinner or that he pleasured her in her own apartment?” quipped Howard.

“It was hardly a pleasant situation,” tsked Sheldon. “Out of desperation I was forced to eat a poor excuse for macaroni and cheese and sleep in a contaminated bed.”

“It’s all in how you choose to see things, Sheldon,” replied the engineer. “For instance, if I were you I’d say that Penny offered me something I couldn’t refuse and ended up in her bed.”
Sheldon cocked his head. “I believe I just said that.”

“You did—but you so didn’t, dude,” Raj said as he shook his head.

“I don’t follow.”

Howard snorted. “That’s hardly a surprise.”

“Howard,” warned Leonard with a slight frown.

“What? It’s not like Sheldon has a deal.”

“I object,” replied Sheldon. “I have several deals, the Roommate Agreement for example.”

“No, I mean you don’t have a sexual deal,” Howard clarified. Sheldon wrinkled his nose.

“A deal is made between two or more parties for their mutual benefit. I fail to see how close contact with sweat, saliva and other bodily secretions is in any way beneficial to me. If anything it’s asking for a pathogen.”

“Well as I have a deal and Penny has a deal maybe we should play together,” said Howard with an eyebrow wiggle.

“She’s not interested,” Leonard said flatly.

“No, she said she’s not interested in you. I’m offering her the good thing found in small packages.”

Sheldon sat back and processed the banter.

“Which can be anything from a breath mint to an antacid,” said Raj. “Penny’s a lady. Quit making her sound like a quick lay.”

The East Texan looked inquiringly at the engineer. “You’re wishing to engage in coitus with Penny?”

“Well, yeah,” gushed Howard.

“You’re not her type,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Like you’re an expert.”

“Granted I haven’t had access to Penny’s complete sexual history but from my observation you are eight inches too short and from a muscular perspective about fifty to eighty pounds too light.”

Howard grimaced. “Yeah, you’re right. Penny’s just out of our league.”

“Explain,” Sheldon said sharply. “She’s a waitress with a community college education and an as-yet to be seen acting ‘career’. How in any world would she be out of my league?”

“Well, for one thing, she’s hot and you look like a praying mantis,” said Howard. “Two, she’s hot and you’re a geek who likes trains and comic books.” He held up a third finger. “And three, she’s hot and you don’t have a deal.”

“Penny and I have a definite deal,” growled Sheldon as he stood up. “She’s my paintball and Halo partner and my friend, qualities that extend far beyond her comeliness.”
‘Comeliness’;” gushed Howard. “Why Sheldon, maybe I was a little quick to dismiss your deal.”

Sheldon shook his head derisively. “Now you’re just being ridiculous. Can we return our focus to something relevant and figure out how many servos we’re going to need?” He went to the refrigerator for a bottled water.

Howard turned to Leonard and raised an inquiring eyebrow. The physicist shrugged.

XxX

*What the hell, Pen?* The Nebraskan flumped down on her couch and ran her hands down her flushed cheeks. Sheldon was her neighbor, a beautiful mind guy who drove her crazy with his routines and ‘Soft Kitty’. She pursed her lips. There was no way she’d let a night of drinking and one misplaced word mess up their friendship. No one was teasing her about it so she knew Stuart had kept quiet. Penny sighed. Just pretend it never happ—

The phone rang and she picked it up from the coffee table and answered.

“Hello? .. Hey Gwen. …I have no idea. … I don’t want to talk to him. …Okay put him on. … So, Kurt, Gwen says you have some money for me? … Damn right you should have paid me. So what brought on the change of heart? … Really? … Well you were a jerk. … Thank you. … I’ve got some stuff to finish but yeah, I can meet you. … Sounds good. … Okay, bye.”

Penny hung up and thoughtfully tapped the phone against her chin.

*Wonder what brought that on?* Still, she wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Maybe my luck’s changing,” she smiled.

xTBBTx

Penny knocked twice before opening the door to 4A. Since she visited daily for her early cup of joe the physicists unlocked their door as a part of their morning routine.

“Coffee?” she said sweetly.

“The café is open,” replied Leonard with a smile.

After spraying her feet Penny walked over to Sheldon’s spot and gave him a gigantic pumpkin grin.

“Hi Sheldon,” she said in a chipper tone.

“Good morning, Penny,” he said cautiously. “Is there a particular reason why you’re emulating the Joker?”

“I’ve got something for you.”

At once he brought his cereal bowl to his chest.

“Don’t punch me,” he said quickly.

Penny looked at him strangely. “Why would I punch you?”

“As children my sister would often say she had ‘something’ for me and then punch me. I wasn’t sure if you were enacting the childhood paradigm.”
“I’m not going to punch you,” Penny sighed.

“Watch it, he’ll take that as an absolute,” warned Leonard before taking a sip of coffee.

“I’m not going to punch you—at this time,” she clarified. “Now hold out your hand.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have dog feces do you?”

“Sheldon!”

Without another word he held out his hand. The Nebraskan dug into her housecoat’s pocket and pulled out a wad of money and set it in his palm.

“Fourteen hundred dollars for you,” she said happily. “Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Sheldon said, his mind whirring. “If I may enquire, how did you come into this windfall?”

“It was the freakiest thing: Kurt called out of nowhere and said he was sorry about acting like a jerk about the tv. Then he said he wanted to make it up to me and had the money he borrowed from me.”

“That was fortuitous,” Sheldon said neutrally.

“Yeah,” said Penny as she went to the counter for her coffee. “It was really different talking with him, like he’s really changed.” Sheldon and Leonard exchanged looks as the latter poured Penny’s coffee. “I dunno, we’ll see what’s what this Friday.”

“Friday?” prompted Leonard.

“Kurt asked me out to dinner,” Penny said as she poured Sheldon’s milk into her mug, oblivious to the silence of the apartment. “I know, call me stupid but I think he’s really changed.”

“You’re stupid,” Sheldon said firmly, dropping Penny’s jaw.

“And just how would you know?”

“If you haven’t forgotten I’m acquainted with your ex-boyfriend,” he said stiffly as he got up from the couch and proceeded to the sink with his cereal bowl and juice glass.

“Yeah, he knows he was a jerk,” explained Penny. “But we have history so I’ve gotta see for myself what his deal is, y’know?”

Sheldon washed his dishes and put them in the drying rack.

“So you’re going to engage in coitus?” he said evenly.

“In what?”

“I’m sure they’re not going to have sex, Sheldon,” Leonard said soothingly.

“Of course we’re not having sex,” growled Penny. “Holy crap we’re just having dinner.”

“I see.” The lanky physicist took a paper towel and dried his hands. “Another enquiry: explain to me how you think Kurt is possible of ‘change’ when his previous actions have been self-serving and aggressive?”
“I dunno. Maybe he found religion or something.” She took a sip of coffee.

“Or perhaps he had someone explain the legal ramifications of his failure to repay a loan.”

Leonard winced.

Penny was livid. “You went to Kurt?!”

Sheldon nodded. “As you were in need of capital and Kurt owed you—”

“I don’t believe you! What, you don’t think I can fight my own battles?”

“I don’t understand your reaction,” Sheldon countered. “You were happy to get your money back. Why should it matter if I was involved?”

That stopped Penny.

“I dunno,” she said in a lower voice. She regarded her neighbor as he stared back with inquiring blue eyes. *Stuart’s lips on her neck and all she could think of was—* “Maybe I was hoping to make up with Kurt.”

At once Sheldon’s back straightened.

“I hadn’t anticipated that response;” he said at last.

To Leonard there was a palpable silence he could cut with an ax just a millisecond before Penny responded.

“It’s just that since we broke up nothing’s gone right for me. No acting jobs—”

“You were in the Rent review,” amended the lanky physicist.

“Okay, no real acting jobs. I’m still at the Cheesecake Factory. I’m in debt up to my eyeballs—”

“You met me,” Sheldon said evenly.

*Lips on her neck and—* “Yeah I did,” Penny said.

“While I’m inexperienced I like to think I’ve been an exemplary friend.”

“You have,” she said. *I’ve been the Big Ol’ Five, not you.*

“Then as your friend I’m advising you that Kurt has not changed and that it’s not a good idea to dine with him,” the physicist said firmly.

Penny shrugged. “Maybe I’ve got to see it for myself, y’know? ’I’m from Missouri’ and all that.”

“I don’t have to see a graviton to know it exists,” countered Sheldon. “And you’re from Nebraska so your point is moot.”

“Sheldon, just let me do this, okay?” Penny sighed.

“Alright,” he replied through pursed lips. “But I reserve the right to utilize the phrase ‘I told you so’.” He skirted by the waitress and went to the washroom.

“Thank you Doctor Doom,” she called after him.
“That’s cool,” said Leonard. “I didn’t know you knew who Doctor Doom was.”

“What are you talking about?” Penny said in a grumpy tone.

“Uh, never mind,” Leonard blushed and took a sip of coffee.

Leonard swallowed his forkful of bean salad.

“Okay, Sheldon’s been acting weird all morning so leave him be,” he warned Raj and Howard.

“What, is he acting humble and friendly?” quipped the engineer as he peppered his corn.

“Howard, I’m serious. He was really upset.”

“So what’s got him so uptight?” asked Raj. “Did you alter the settings on the tv again?”

“No.” Leonard munched on his salad. “Penny got money back from her ex-boyfriend who’s now taking her out to dinner.”

The astrophysicist was puzzled. “So? Why would Sheldon be up…set….” His eyes widened. “No way!”

“You mean Shelbot has a thing for Penny?” chuckled Howard.

“I think so,” said Leonard.

“Well it makes sense given his weirdness the other night,” said Howard. “Of course there’s the all important question: does Sheldon know he likes her?” Leonard shrugged.

“I left him a flowchart outlining his relationship with her but there’s been no acknowledgment beyond giving me a strike for ‘doodling on his board’.”

“What about Penny?” asked Raj.

“Well she is going out with her ex,” Howard pointed out.

“Poor Sheldon. She’s going to break his heart,” sighed the astrophysicist.

“He might not notice,” grinned Howard.

Leonard spotted his roommate coming to the table. “Shh! Sheldon.”

“Insolence,” growled Sheldon as he sat next to Leonard.

“What?” the bespectacled physicist said guiltily.

“Kripke,” Sheldon spat. “He heard about our entry into the Southern California Robot Fighting League Round Robin Invitational and bragged that his creation could ‘kick the crap’ out of M.O.N.T.E.”

“He hasn’t seen our capabilities,” chuckled Howard. “He’ll be in for a surprise.”

“Yes, and we’ll be better prepared since unlike Kripke we didn’t put our robot on YouTube.”

“On it,” said the engineer as he pulled out his phone.
“I think we should paint M.O.N.T.E royal purple to show his superiority over all other machines,” said Raj.

“Or we could not,” replied Leonard.

“Holy crap!” Howard held up his phone for the others to see. “‘Robot takes out car’!”

They watched in silence as the ‘Kwipke Kwippler’ systematically took out the Buick.

“He didn’t build a robot he built the Terminator,” breathed Raj. Sheldon snorted.

“Who cares if it’s bigger, stronger and better equipped? It takes a brain to run a robot and I’m infinitely more able than that so-called ‘roboteer’.” Sheldon began cleaning his fingers with a napkin. “Why Kripke even had the nerve to suggest we have a private dual to solve our differences before the tournament.”

“Which you turned down of course,” Leonard said forcefully. Sheldon looked to his roommate.

“Leonard, why would I feel the need to prove myself?”

Just then Kripke came up to the table.

“Hey Coopah,” he said. “See you Fwiday, wooser. Five o’cwock in the pawticaw physics wab. Pwepawe to die.” He walked off chuckling to himself.

“Well that was rude,” said Sheldon, who then noticed the accusing stares of his friends. “He was talking smack about M.O.N.T.E.,” he said defensively.

Howard turned to Leonard.

“I think I see the fatal flaw in M.O.N.T.E.’s programming—he’s being driven by HAL,” he said seriously.

Sheldon scowled at the engineer before taking an aggressive bite of his sandwich.

xTBBTx

A/N: Thedatereportcom: Should I date him flowchart
The four scientists sat dejectedly in apartment 4A.

“Well at least M.O.N.T.E. didn’t suffer,” sighed Raj.

“Didn’t suffer?” Howard said incredulously. “Kripke practically shredded him with his robot.” He glared at Sheldon. “Which wouldn’t have happened if *someone* hadn’t declared the match ‘to the death’.”

“I’m sure that someone realizes his lesson in hubris and doesn’t need to have it rubbed in,” Sheldon replied delicately.

Two knocks sounded at the door before it opened and Penny entered wearing a yellow sundress and open red sweater.


“In the dumper but we’ll live,” said Leonard.

“Unlike M.O.N.T.E.,” Howard jabbed, garnering a glare from Sheldon.

“Yeah. It really sucks since you worked so hard on that toy robot,” Penny agreed.

“‘Toy robot?’” stammered Sheldon. “M.O.N.T.E. was a beautiful creation—and I killed him!” He bolted from the couch to his room.

“Wow, two robots destroyed in one day,” murmured Howard.

“Crap on a cracker,” sighed Penny as she sprayed the bottoms of her shoes before venturing to Sheldon’s room. “Sheldon, I’m sorry.”

“Go away,” she heard him sniffle.

“I’m coming in.”

“No you’re not! Nobody can be in my room!”

She opened the door and saw him curled up on his bed.

“Aw, sweetie, I’m sorry about your…M.O.N.T.E.” Penny said from the doorway.

“It’s all my fault,” Sheldon said quietly. “Kripke baited me and I wouldn’t back down and now M.O.N.T.E.’s dead.”

“Well, maybe not dead-dead.” Sheldon sat up and looked at his friend incredulously.

“Howard said he saw space debris that landed in the desert in better condition.”
“Yeah but that doesn’t mean you can’t use some of M.O.N.T.E.’s parts,” she countered gently. “I mean even if they’re just screws or something it still comes from him.”

“Cannibalizing him for parts,” he sighed. “He deserves a better fate than this.”

“Look at it this way: giving his parts to the next robot is sorta like us passing on our genes to our children. You can build ‘son of M.O.N.T.E.’” she said enthusiastically.

Sheldon cocked his head. “Penny, M.O.N.T.E. is a robot. Robots don’t have genetic offspring.”

She smiled crookedly. “You get my drift, genius.”

“I suppose.” Sheldon sighed deeply. “I don’t like being the cause of his demise.”

“What about Snowball?”

“Snowball was sacrificed for science. M.O.N.T.E., for pride.” He regarded Penny. “I don’t like this feeling.”

“Then don’t do it again and you’ll honor M.O.N.T.E.” she said.

He nodded. “You’re right.” He got off the bed and came to the door. “M.O.N.T.E was a simple soul and his funeral should reflect this.” Penny raised an eyebrow. “I’ll speak. Leonard can play his cello.” He stepped into the hall and closed his door. “Wear something appropriate.”

“Uh, yeah,” Penny said and the two of them returned to the living room.

“I see your reboot was successful,” Howard said not unkindly.

“One down, three to go,” Penny replied as she went to stand on the mat in front of the door. “Listen, I thought you guys could use some cheering up so I’m inviting you over to my party this Saturday.”

“Dear Lord, not this madness again,” sighed Sheldon.

“No, not like before. It’s a football party. The Cornhuskers are playing so a bunch of us are getting together to watch the game.”

“And by ‘a bunch of us’ you mean a bunch of women-folk like yourself or beer guzzling jocks?” asked Howard.

“Both. It’s guys and their girlfriends mostly but there are a few single people there.”

“And by ‘people’ you mean—”

“I mean women, Howard,” Penny clarified. “But you have to be good.”

“My dear, I am nothing if not a gentleman,” the engineer said in mock-hurt.

Penny shook her head. “Why am I regretting this already?” She opened the door. “Later guys.”

“Bye Penny,” said Leonard.

“Awesome!” Howard chimed as Raj and he gave each other a hi-five.

“Now I only have one question,” said Raj. “How do you play football?” He looked at Howard and Leonard, who shrugged.
“I guess we’ll have to look it up,” said Leonard as he took a sip of water. “I mean I’ve seen it on tv as I flipped through channels: a bunch of big guys lining up against each other and then running around until the play stops.”

“They don’t just ‘line up against each other’,” Sheldon tsked as he opened the container that held the communal Mystic Warriors of Ka’a cards. “They form at the line of scrimmage.”

“Which means?” prompted Raj.

“The line of scrimmage is the imaginary transverse line separating the offence from the defense.”

“How do you know this?” gasped Leonard.

“I grew up in Texas, Leonard. Football is ubiquitous in Texas.” Sheldon began to shuffle the cards.

“I see—Please teach us,” Raj begged.

“There are plenty of online resources at your reach,” the lanky physicist said. “I’ve no interest in reliving my hellish moments watching the game with my father when I could have been doing something much more entertaining like my homework.”

“It’d be great if I met someone there,” sighed Howard. “After Christie left it’s been kinda lonely. I’ve tried this dating website but there’s only so far ‘wealthybigpenis’ can travel.”

“‘Wealthybigpenis’? Seriously?” Leonard said in disgust.

“There are a lot of foreign women there. I have to keep my English simple,” Howard explained. “Besides, you can’t tell me that you’re not hankering for female companionship after Leslie.”

“I guess,” Leonard said thoughtfully.

“Gentlemen, need I remind you that it’s Mystic Warriors of Ka’a night?” Sheldon said, annoyed.

“Please Sheldon,” Raj begged again.

“Raj, I have no interest in providing the means for mass copulation.”

“But—”

“No, no, Sheldon’s right,” Howard said innocently. “He has no interest in coitus so we shouldn’t force him to help us have sex.”

“Rather astute for a man with a Masters degree,” Sheldon said evenly as he finished shuffling the last of the rather large deck of cards.

Howard rubbed his thumb and forefinger against his chin. “Let’s talk about something else…. Oh, I know, how about Penny going on a date with her ex-boyfriend?”

“I believe I won the last game so I deal,” Sheldon said icily as he took the top part of the deck and began dealing.


“I hear there’s a new expansion pack coming out, tentatively called Satanimals,” Sheldon said
“They say once you have sex with someone all of your senses come alive when you see them. Why I bet Penny and what’s his face will have a hard time keeping their hands—”

“The origin of professional football can be traced back to eighteen ninety two, with William ‘Pudge’ Heffelfinger’s five hundred dollar contract to play in a game for the Allegheny Athletic Association against the Pittsburgh Athletic Club,” Sheldon said in a loud voice.

“Et voila,” grinned Howard as he gestured towards Sheldon.

“Alright Poindexter, shut up and listen,” scowled the lanky physicist. “An American football field measures one hundred yards long and fifty three yards wide. White markings on the side of the field mark the yards in order to aid in determining the ball’s placement on the field. The end zone is an additional ten yards…”

Through the chattering and laughter in her apartment Penny heard the knock at her door.

“That the Geek Squad?” Gwen asked innocently. Penny pursed her lips.

“Be good,” she warned. “They’re nice guys. Well, except for Howard. Not that he’s a bad person but, well, you’ll understand when you meet him.”

"Was that the creepy guy at the birthday party with the bowl-shaped haircut?"

"Please be good," Penny reiterated. In response Gwen winked and went to the counter for a beer.

With a sigh Penny crossed over to the door, opened it and immediately bit her lower lip to keep from laughing. Howard, Raj and Leonard all stood before her with flowing Cornhuskers jerseys that went to their knees and giant grins on their faces.

“Wow,” she said with a smile. “Jerseys and everything.”

“We went over the social protocol for game watching,” Leonard said. “We’re appropriately attired, have brought snacks”—here he held up two bags of barbecue chips and Raj, a twelve pack of beer. Howard, for his part, handed Penny a foiled package.

“What’s this?” she asked. Whatever it was it had quite a weight to it.

“My mother made a brisket for the occasion,” Howard explained.

“Uh, thanks,” she replied. “When’s Sheldon coming over? The game starts in five minutes.”

“I don’t think he’s coming,” said Leonard, making Penny frown.

“Why not? I went to his robot’s funeral this morning and he didn’t say he wasn’t coming.”

“Yes, but he didn’t specifically say he was going either,” Leonard replied, garnering a scowl from the Nebraskan. “Of course I can see your point.”

“Let me go get him. There’s chips and stuff on the counter and coffee table. Raj, if you can find a space in my fridge for your beer you’re welcome to it. Other than that, mingle around. They don’t bite.” Penny crossed the hall and knocked once on the door before entering.

Leonard, Raj and Howard all looked at each other before taking a step into the apartment.
Immediately they felt all eyes on their person before the gathering went back to their conversations.

“Hulking guys and beautiful women all ignoring us,” whispered Raj. “Penny’s right: we’re fitting right in.”

Over at 4A Penny saw her neighbor busy clacking away at his computer.

“Psst, Sheldon, the party’s this way,” she teased.

“I’m aware, hence the reason why I’m right here,” he replied without looking away from his laptop.

Penny set the brisket on the shelf and sprayed her feet before crossing over to the physicist.

“I thought we had a deal—I bury M.O.N.T.E. and you come to my football game,” she said firmly.

“No, what you had was a presupposition. What you’re witnessing is actuality.”

“Give me one good reason why you don’t want to come.”

“I don’t like football.”

“But you’re from Texas!” Penny gasped.

“Granted in an alternate universe there might be a Sheldon who watches football.” He turned his head. “But it’s not this one.” He returned to his computer.

Penny sat on the arm of the couch. “But it isn’t so much the game as the getting together, y’know?”

“I can’t really say I do. Besides, I have no wish to spend my valuable time on vacuous ilk like your ex-boyfriend,” he said evenly as he typed.

“Kurt’s not here.” She sighed as she rolled her eyes. “We didn’t even get through dinner before he was trying to get back into my pants like the old days. The same lines. The same…ugh!” Here she narrowed her eyes. “And no saying ‘I told you so’.”

“Very well,” replied Sheldon. “Although I did inform you thusly.”

Penny laughed out loud. “My psychic said I’d have trouble with a Taurus this week.”

“Complete hokum,” Sheldon chided. Penny folded her arms across her chest.

“Let me guess, you’re a skeptic.”

“No,” he said slowly, “I’m sane.”

“Your mom ever say where she had you tested?”

Sheldon stopped typing and swiveled his chair to face his neighbor. “Then explain to me why psychics aren’t employed by insurance companies to hedge their bets? ‘I’m sorry sir, due to a bad tarot spread that was confirmed by your tea leaves we find you a risk to insure.’”

She pursed her lips. “Well I know for a fact that my psychic is real.”
“Alright,” he twanged. “Far be it from me to allow personal bias to contaminate your premise.”

His eyes were bemused. “Dazzle me.”

“Well she knew that I would get the Rent gig.”

“Specifically by name?”

“Yes.”

“Before or after you told her about it?”

Penny looked a little unsure. “I don’t remember. Probably before.”

“Probably,” he snorted, garnering a glare. “Your tenuous grasp of sequential order hardly persuades me.”

“Well she knew that Kurt and I were going to break up.”

“While I know about the invisible six foot rabbit living in my room.”

“Now you’re just being stupid,” Penny growled.

“I am never stupid,” Sheldon fired back as he leaned forward in his chair. “If there’s no way to disprove my contention, no conceivable experiment that would count against it, what does it mean to say that my rabbit exists?”

“It *doesn’t* exist!”

“Exactly,” he said with a smug smile. “Your inability to invalidate my hypothesis is not at all the same thing as proving it true.”

“Or in other words you think I’m stupid,” Penny said hotly.

Sheldon shrugged. “I haven’t attempted to estimate your I.Q. although this belief in psychics and a propensity to watch helmeted jocks hammer things out on a grassy field does lead me to estimate it’s comfortably in the realm of mid-average.”

“Forget about coming. You’re no longer invited,” she snapped as she marched to the door.

“I already informed you I wasn’t going.” He folded his arms in front of his chest. “That doesn’t make me psychic.”

Penny slipped on her flip-flops and grabbed the brisket before opening the door.

“You know, Sheldon, I felt sorry for you because you said you didn’t have any friends. I think I understand why.”

“People are jealous of my intellect.”

“I’m not,” she said seriously. “Because it isn’t your smarts that separates you from other people. It’s you being a douche.”

“I’m a defender of logic and truth,” Sheldon said icily. “Because I don’t candy-coat my answers doesn’t mean they’re without merit. I’m not going to nod my head like a simpleton when you talk about psychics and horoscopes.”

“But it’s okay for you to go on and on about Spock and Star Trek?” she said incredulously.
“Star Trek is a revered television show and Spock, a beloved character,” he said as he indicated an action figure wearing black pants and a long sleeved blue shirt reminiscent of the outfit Sheldon wore at the physics tournament. “Psychics are charlatans who prey on the gullible.”

“Yeah I must be a damn fool.” She shook her head. “I actually thought you liked me.”

“I never said I didn’t,” Sheldon replied.

“But you never say you do.”

“As I said before I’m unfamiliar with the friendship paradigm to properly—”

“Wrong answer,” Penny scowled. “You know maybe we shouldn’t talk.”

“Alright.” She made to close the door. “For how long?”

“At this point, until hell freezes over.”

“Good Lord, you believe in that too?”

She made to speak but instead closed the door behind her. In five large strides she was across the hall. Inside her apartment Gwen and Raj were chatting over beers while Howard had three female friends cornered by the sink and was pulling a massive amount of colored handkerchiefs from his sleeve.

“And here’s the cheesecake scented goddess with my brisket,” said Howard as Penny came to the counter and put the brisket by the bowl of popcorn.

“Put a cork in it, Howard,” she grumbled and went to the couch.

“Brisket?” he offered to the remaining ladies. “My mother made it this morning.”

“Go! Go! Go! Go-Go-Go-Go! Yes! Are you people watching this? Is this amazing or what?” gushed Leonard enthusiastically, unaware of the strange stares given by his fellow game-watchers.

“Dude, that’s a highlight from the ‘ninety eight championship game,” said a tall, ruggedly handsome man sitting next to him on the couch wearing a blue checkered shirt over a black t-shirt.


“No worries.” He held out a bottle. “Beer?”

“Sure,” said Leonard as he took it. “While I’m participating in a social interaction I might as well engage in mimesis.” He struggled getting the cap off.

“Actually, it’s Bud Lite,” Zack amended.

After watching Leonard struggle Penny reached over for the bottle and opened it with a strong twist.

“Thanks,” Leonard said as he took back the bottle. “I couldn’t get the right torque.”

“Sportchek has a lot of bitched hats,” said Zack as he watched the game.

“Uh, I didn’t say toque I said torque which is a twisting force that causes a twisting motion,” Leonard amended.
“Kind of a funny word—tor-k.”

With a roll of the eyes Penny left to the washroom and her bottle of aspirin.

XxX

“Well that was interesting,” said Leonard as he sat on his stuffed chair. “Our first football game.”

“And if Penny has anything to say about it, our last,” chuckled Howard as he checked his email on Leonard’s laptop. “It’s funny, Penny said that some of her friends were single but every one of them told me she had a boyfriend.”

“Sounds like a conspiracy,” said Leonard neutrally.

“What about you, Raj?” asked the engineer. “You were chatting that hot brunette up for quite a while.”

“It was nothing,” Raj said quickly. “You know, the weather and whatnot.”

“Nice try. When I passed by you two were in deep conversation. Something about travelling in Italy and India?”

“It was nothing,” Raj repeated adamantly.

“Ouch,” said Howard. “Now you’re about as touchy as Penny.” He turned his head to Sheldon as the latter typed away at his computer. “So what’d you do besides be your ever-charming self?”

“I didn’t ‘do’ anything,” Sheldon said formally. “She invited me to the game, I declined and then we proceeded to discuss the fallacy that is fortunetelling. Apparently Penny believes in ‘psychics’.”

“And you said…,” prompted Leonard.

“Leonard, you know it’s hokum,” sniffed Sheldon. “Even after using a variation of a Sagan analogy Penny still insisted she wasn’t delusional.”

“Now there’s a reality warp—Sheldon accusing someone else of being out of her mind,” quipped Howard, garnering a glare from the lanky physicist.

“Be that as it may, I’m still right.” Sheldon logged off his computer and stood up. “Although my sanity should be questioned for being friends with someone who believes in tarot card readings.”

“Aw, you didn’t tell her that did you?” groaned Leonard.

“Of course not. I merely said that psychics are charlatans who prey on the gullible.” Sheldon proceeded down the hall.

“And what did Penny say?” asked Raj.

“We’d talk later.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “When’s later?”

“When hell freezes over,” said Sheldon as he vanished around the corner. A moment and then his door closed.

“I’ll go check up on Penny,” sighed Leonard and exited the apartment.

“A little bit,” Howard said sarcastically. “Look, come here.” The astrophysicist obliged. “You see this site? There are thousands of women looking for a man right this moment.”

“Yeah, but how many of them would be interested in me?”

“Well, you’re a male so that puts you in the ballpark right there. The rest are just details.”

Raj snorted. “By that token Sheldon would be a catch.” A thought came to him and he smiled. “You know what would be awesome? Make a profile for Sheldon.”

“Yeah, like that’d work,” chuckled Howard. “‘Greetings fellow life-form.’” He cocked his head. “Still it’d be definitive proof that aliens walked among us if someone answered.”

“Let’s get mine and Sheldon’s profiles done.”

“I follow Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics’. Man, Sheldon’s profile just writes itself,” Howard said with a smirk.

“All I know is that I’ll have a cow if Sheldon gets a response before me,” said Raj as he pulled over Sheldon’s computer chair to join his friend. “And believe me that’s a big deal in India.”

XxX

Leonard tapped at Penny’s door. “Penny?”

“Door’s open, Leonard.” He turned the handle and entered to find Penny in the midst of cleaning up the snacks and bottles around her living room. “‘Sup?”

“I just thought I’d see if you needed any help,” he said innocently.

“Na, it’s good.” She emptied the remains of the beer in the sink before putting the bottles in the cases. “You want the rest of the brisket?”

“No, I have them all the time at Howard’s place.”

“The guys really liked it.” Here she chuckled. “Goodbye Papa John’s and hello Mrs. Wolowitz.”

“Yeah.” Leonard gathered the bowls on the coffee table and brought them to the counter. “I realize that we didn’t exactly blend seamlessly into the crowd but I just wanted to say that we enjoyed ourselves.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Zack seemed to take a real shine to you and Gwen thought Raj was pretty insightful and would totally make an awesome gay bff.”

“Raj isn’t gay,” replied Leonard.

“Apparently Gwen and he were all talking about Eat, Pray, Love, various exfoliating creams and the day spa with the biggest bang for your buck.”

Leonard thought for a moment. “Okay. If we forget the massive amount of female pornography on his laptop I could totally go with the gay thing.”

“Too much info,” chuckled Penny as she wrinkled her nose.
“Sorry.” Leonard handed her the bowls and she put them in the sink. “Too bad Sheldon couldn’t come.”

A scowl immediately covered Penny’s face. “So *that’s* why you’re here.”

“No,” he replied quickly. “I was just making conversation.”

“Good, because I don’t want to talk about it,” she said firmly and continued stacking beer bottles.

“Sure, sure.” Silence save for the clinking of beer bottles. “It’s funny how people think about the world according to their own point of view.”

“Oh balls,” grumbled Penny.

“I mean Sheldon’s a physicist. He follows the scientific method in his work and it’s crossed over into his everyday outlook.”

“What’s the scientific method besides being an ass-hat?”

“It’s a procedure employing systematic observation, measurement and experiment and the formulation, testing and modification of hypotheses. To be termed scientific, a method of inquiry must be based on empirical and measurable evidence subject to specific principles of reasoning.”

“‘Principles of reasoning’, huh?” Penny said grimly.

“The foundation for physics. So you see, Sheldon isn’t being an intentional ‘ass-hat’ he’s just—”

“You’re a physicist,” Penny growled. “You think I’m a quack for believing in psychics?”

“A quack?” Leonard said in a panicky tone. “Of course not!” He smiled in what he hoped was a disarming manner. “In my experience there’s two types of people that make the world go round: those who follow facts and those that don’t.” Penny came from behind the counter and Leonard began back-peddling towards the door. “Not that not following facts is bad, it’s just that you have to communicate with them on an emotional level rather than a rational one.”

“Out!” barked Penny as she pointed to the door.

Leonard was out of there like a shot.

xTBBTx

Leonard swallowed nervously as he stood next to his mother in the elevator. He always found himself at a loss as to what to say to her given her tendency to analyze and dismiss practically everything he said.

“So, how was your trip?” he said amicably.

“Be more specific,” Dr. Beverly Hofstadter replied evenly as she stood stiffly wearing a skirt-suit.

“Uh, were you comfortable?”

“In what way?”

“Physically?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” she said as she stared at the elevator door.
“Never mind.” The doors opened and they both emerged at his floor. “That reminds me, I have to warn you about my roommate.”

“I’m familiar with Dr. Cooper and his autistic and obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Moreover I’ve seen several of his brain scans so there’s nothing about him that could surprise me.”

Leonard unlocked the door and let it swing open. Beverly saw Sheldon sitting on the couch surrounded by cats.

“Surprise,” Leonard said with a smirk.

“Dr. Hofstadter!” Sheldon said cheerily.

“Dr. Cooper,” she replied as she took in the scene. “I see you have a clowder of cats.”

“Originally I had Robert Oppenheimer,” he said as he indicated a tabby cat with his head. “But he got lonely.”

“Now we’ve got the whole Manhattan Project,” sighed Leonard as he closed the door. “I’ll take your suitcase to your room.”

“Your attempt at asserting dominance is noted but unnecessary,” said Beverly as she took up the antibacterial spray and cleaned the bottom of her shoes.

“Some people would just call it ‘nice’.”

“And just who are these ‘people’ and why is their opinion relevant?” Beverly grabbed her suitcase.

“Never mind.”

“I have the same problem with him,” tsked Sheldon. “My theory is that his lack of focus stems from an over-developed sex drive.”

“Excuse me?!” spat Leonard. “I’ve only had sex with Leslie and we’re not even dating anymore!”

“Premarital sex,” said Beverly thoughtfully. “I don’t know where you would’ve gotten that behavior. Aside from a pro forma consummation of our marriage, your father and I only had intercourse for the purposes of reproduction.”

“Too much information, mother,” Leonard called over his shoulder as he went down the hall to his room.

“There’s a difference between too much information and remaining ignorant,” Beverly said as she followed her son. “Sadly a distinction your father fails to recognize.”

“Here we are,” Leonard said as he entered his room and set the suitcase at the foot of the bed.

“You’re stating the obvious,” said Beverly. She looked around the room, noting the various comic and sci fi objects. “I see your regression has permeated to your décor.”

“Why thank you,” Leonard said mockingly.

“Why? It was an observation not a compliment.” Her son rolled his eyes.

Leonard went to his nightstand. “Let me just get my allergy medication. The cats are murder on my sinuses.”
Beverly turned to him. “So you were not part of the decision making process regarding the introduction of felines to your apartment?”

“Nope. Penny and Sheldon stop talking and the next minute Robert Oppenheimer’s nestled beside him on the couch.”

“Penny. His girlfriend?”

“It’s complicated.”

“For you it often is,” Beverly said dismissively as she went to her suitcase. “Elaborate.”

“Well, Penny’s his first real friend and they had a fight about…fundamental philosophical beliefs and now they’re not talking,” he explained.

“I don’t see how this is complicated, unless I’ve overestimated your I.Q.,” his mother said evenly as she hung up her clothes in Leonard’s closet.

“Well the narrative isn’t but the emotions are,” Leonard scowled. “Sheldon hasn’t had experience with losing a friend and he certainly is ill-equipped to fix the situation.”

Beverly raised an eyebrow. “Now this is interesting.” She took up her purse and laptop bag and returned to the living room followed by her now-curious son.

“Dr. Cooper,” she said evenly. “Leonard informs me you’re having emotional difficulties regarding your severed relationship with Penny.”

“I’m having no such thing,” Sheldon said as he scowled at Leonard. “Penny and I have mutually decided to part ways due to her ridiculous belief in psychic phenomena. Plus she called me stupid.”

“Then in forty-eight hours we got a horde of cats,” Leonard pointed out.

“A clowder, Leonard,” said Sheldon. “A gathering of cats is a—”

“I know it’s a clowder! Sheldon, you’re clearly upset about breaking up with Penny and you’re trying to replace her with a bunch of cats.”

“I didn’t ‘break up’ with Penny. She’s a girl, she was a friend, but not my ‘girlfriend’.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Look, I get the loneliness. Remember when Leslie and I broke up?”

“She dumped you,” amended Sheldon.

“Anyways,” scowled the shorter physicist. “I went off to Vegas and had fun with my friends. We went to the casino, saw a show. Bonding at its best.”

“You copulated with a prostitute,” said Sheldon as he scratched behind the ears of the cat sitting on his lap.

Beverly looked to her son. “I hope she provided the temporary psychic relief you needed to deal with conflicts about your guilt and responsibility for your failed relationship instead of chlamydia.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Leonard said defensively. “Leslie didn’t want to be serious and—” He shook his head. “This isn’t about me! Sheldon’s the one sitting with a herd of cats and—” His eyes narrowed as he looked at the cat on Sheldon’s lap. “Is that a new cat?”
“Zazzles,” cooed Sheldon. “I was going to name him Herman von Helmholtz but he’s so”—he raised the cat onto its hind paws and playfully pawed the air with the front paws—“zazzy.”

“Dr. Cooper,” said Beverly. “I’d like to scan your brain.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” the lanky physicist said happily as he put Zazzles on the couch and stood. “Let me get my jacket and wallet.”

After he went to his room Leonard turned to his mother.

“You don’t think this is some kind of tumor or something?” he said.

“I doubt I’d be that lucky,” she replied evenly. “I’m curious to map his neural network.”

“Since he’s gone crazy,” Leonard concluded.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But he is right—the cat is zazzy.”

Leonard let out a gigantic sigh.

xTBBTx

Penny pulled out her keys as she approached 2311 North Los Robles. Tonight had been another lackluster night tip-wise at the Cheesecake Factory and all she wanted to do was strip and soak in her tub.

She noted that ahead of her was a tall brunette with a professional look to her clothes who stopped at the building entrance and seemed to be staring through the glass door.

“Hi,” Penny said with a friendly smile. “Mind if I slip past ya to open the door?”

“Why would I mind?” asked the woman. “I wouldn’t be standing in front of a door if I wasn’t expecting it to be opened.”

A funny look came to Penny’s face as she unlocked the door.

“Are you related to Dr. Cooper by any chance?”

“No,” replied the woman.

“Huh. Two Sheldons. Who woulda thought?” muttered Penny as she held the door open.

Immediately the two women stopped at the entrance and took in the scene of boxes and wrapped furniture all over the place and Howard, Raj and Leonard struggling to get a dresser into the elevator. To their right by the mail boxes was an attractive blonde with a clip board and a clingy top Penny thought was kinda cute.

“Hey guys,” Penny called out. “What’s all this?”

Leonard stood up. “Hey Penny. We’re helping Alicia move into 5A.”

“I really appreciate the help,” Alicia said with a little smile.

“And we appreciate you letting us help,” replied Leonard with a goofy grin.

“If I could distract you from your demonstration of physical prowess for the purpose of attracting a
mate for coital purposes I’d like entrance to the apartment,” Beverly said evenly.

“Yes mother,” Leonard said and gave her his key.

“Oh, so this is your mother?” said Penny. “I can totally see the resemblance now.”

“Based on his lackluster progress both professionally and personally that’s highly unlikely although we do share myopia,” said Beverly.

“I see,” Penny said neutrally.

“Leonard,” Alicia said sweetly. “I really need to get my stuff in my place.”

“Yes, right,” he said in an enthralled voice that made Penny roll her eyes.

“Don’t work too hard,” Penny said politely but firmly as Alicia and she exchanged catty expressions. She turned to Beverly. “Stairs?”

“As our other option is to wait for three physically underdeveloped males to maneuver furniture into the elevator I believe the stairs are a satisfactory option.” Both Penny and she mounted the stairs.

“So anyways I’m Penny, Leonard’s neighbor,” Penny said brightly.

“Hmm. A talker. I see.”

Penny’s smile faltered. “So, been in L.A. long?”

“I arrived Friday for today’s conference and depart tomorrow.”

“Ah, cool.” Silence. “So Leonard said you were a psychiatrist.”

“That’s one of my degrees. I’m primarily a neuroscientist.”

“That’s why Sheldon’s always having his brain scanned.”

“Yes, he’s one of my test subjects. His eidetic memory and heightened I.Q. make for an interesting study.” Beverly raised an eyebrow even as she cocked her head slightly to the left.

“Which is why it’s puzzling that you stimulate his caudate nucleus like you do.”

“Excuse me?”

“You elevate his dopamine and norepinephrine production.” Beverly noted Penny’s blank look. “Both are brain chemicals associated with pleasurable activities and excitement.”

Penny thought about this and her jaw dropped.

“You mean he likes me?” she breathed.

“It’s obvious.”

“Wow.” Penny’s stomach fluttered in excitement. “You mean likes me likes me. Not just as friends?”

“As he is inexperienced with non-familial bonds he may believe you and he are engaged in a friendship paradigm but given his extreme response to the dissolution of your relationship the notion that he hasn’t formed a deeper emotional attachment is remote.”
“Huh.” Penny felt unexpectedly high and absolutely loved the feeling. “So why hasn’t he said anything?”

“He’s in denial of his feelings, if he’s consciously aware of them at all, but I assure you they are there.” Beverly looked down her nose at the waitress. “Much the same way you harbor feelings for your father.”

“What?” gasped Penny.

“Your delighted expression at my mentioning Dr. Cooper’s romantic interest in you suggests an external locus of identity i.e. you value yourself only as others value you, which is often the result of unmet childhood emotional needs.”

“But I had a wonderful childhood!” exclaimed Penny.

“I see,” replied Beverly. “Tell me about it.”

XxX

Sheldon sat in his spot surrounded by Zazzles and the Manhattan Project. He felt comforted, although strangely dissatisfied, and more than a little itchy. Obviously his allergy medication was wearing off.

His hearing picked up the sound of Penny sobbing in the stairwell followed by Beverly’s even drone. At once Sheldon’s stomach dropped and he removed himself from the couch just as a key inserted in the lock and Beverly opened the door. Now Penny’s crying came in loud and clear as she entered her apartment and closed the door.

“What’s wrong?” Sheldon asked.

“She’s just crying over her father,” Beverly replied.

“Did something happen to him?”

Beverly sprayed her shoes. “No. She’s having trouble meeting unattainable expectations in an attempt to gain his approval.”

“Ah,” replied the physicist as he continued to stare at Penny’s door until Beverly closed the apartment door. His eyes immediately snapped to her shoulder. “Can I get you some tea?”

“I doubt it, but if anyone has a chance it’s probably you.”

Sheldon went to the washroom to clean his hands before returning to the kitchen and preparing the water and accoutrements for tea. Beverly, for her part, moved Leonard’s laptop to the floor so she could put her own on his desk.

“After making my tea you might wish to approach Penny so as to take advantage of her vulnerability,” she said casually.

Sheldon cocked his head. “For what purpose would I take advantage of Penny?”

“From what Leonard said the two of you have reached an impasse. Penny’s current despondent state should make her receptive to a reconciliation.”

“Why would I want to reconcile? She believes in psychic phenomena.”
“Because your neocortex is being overwhelmed by your amygdala,” Beverly said absently as she logged on to her computer.

“I disagree,” Sheldon said stiffly.

“Your rational mind is compromised.” She turned in her chair to face him. “Explain to me why you obtained feline companionship immediately following your relationship dissolution especially since your allergies are moderate and require constant medication.”

Sheldon focused on making tea. “Cats make wonderful companions. They don’t argue or question my intellectual authority. They most definitely don’t call me stupid.” He removed the spoon and brought the cup over to the neuroscientist.

“Oolong?” asked Beverly as she took the cup.

“Yes.”

“Loose, not bagged?”

“Yes.”

“Steeped three minutes?”

“Yes.”

“Two-percent milk?”

“Yes.”

“Warmed separately?”

“Yes.”

“One teaspoon raw sugar?”

“Yes.”

She took a sip. “Adequate.” Sheldon nodded and went to clean up the counter.

“Hypothetically speaking, what would be the best course of action to reinstate my friendship with Penny?” he asked innocently.

“But I’m not sorry.”

“Then focus on the one thing you obviously do regret.”

“I’m sorry she’s so gullible,” he shrugged.

“Don’t forget that you’re limited by Penny’s emotional and intellectual capacity to comprehend. Reinforce positive feelings you have for your relationship and sign off with optimism.”

Sheldon took a moment to think. “I’d need a premise for going over.”

“You could enquire as to her status and be a neutral listener.” She sensed Sheldon’s hesitancy. “Of course your other option is to remain here and continue to acquire cats until the Pasadena
Humane Society intervenes."

After cleaning his hands with cleanser Sheldon crossed the room and exited his apartment.

A smirk came to Beverly’s face as she typed.

“Autistic wunderkind and an aspiring actress,” she said evenly. “Fascinating.”

In front of 4B Sheldon thought over what Beverly had said. He still disputed her accusation that he was acting irrationally. He was Dr. Sheldon Cooper BS, MA, PHD, Sc.D. Resolver of the Black Hole Information Paradox.

And yet he couldn’t understand why it was so imperative he was here.

He only knew it was.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“Come in,” said a small voice. Sheldon pursed his lips. He didn’t like that.

He entered to find Penny on her couch in her Nebraska sweatshirt, baseball cap and track pants with a bottle of wine on her table and a glass in hand.

“Hey,” she sniffled and wiped her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve.

“I overheard your distress and under the Friendship Agreement Section Four Part One I’m obligated to render emotional aid,” he said as he closed the door behind him.

“What makes you think we’re still friends?” she asked.

Sheldon clasped his hands behind his back.

“As I’m neither a plumber nor a superintendant I hardly think you’d allow me into your apartment if we weren’t friends. More importantly, you never gave me a Notice of Termination.”

In spite of herself she chucked quietly. “My bad.”

“Do you wish to end our friendship?” he said seriously.

“No.” He let out a silent breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Then let me proceed with my duty. You’re upset. Discuss.”

Penny took a large gulp of wine. “Apparently the locus of my identity is totally exterior to me.”

“Do you have any supporting evidence?”

“I played sports to get my dad to notice me even though I hated getting dirty,” she sniffled. “He called me Slugger until I got my first training bra, and then he just stopped playing catch with me.”

“So you felt abandoned.”

“I tried to do the best I could,” Penny pouted. “I was a cheerleader and in the Corn Queen’s Court
and then when I said I wanted to act he practically had a fit.”

Sheldon nodded. “Since you lacked your father’s approval you sought out external support through public extracurricular activities and promiscuity.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not a slut,” she snapped.

“I never said you were. Your means, method and frequency of coital activities are your own business.”

She frowned. “So why are you saying I’m promiscuous?”

“I’m not saying it. The math’s saying it.” he replied evenly.

“How?”

“Based on the number of men I’ve seen leave your apartment you average—”

“Sheldon don’t.” Silence and then a thought came to her. “I never knew you kept track.”

“I’m a physicist. I keep track of everything.”

Penny narrowed her eyes and really looked at her neighbor but he didn’t seem any different with his hands behind his back, even tone complexion and matter-of-fact professor voice. Only his eyes were focused on her shoulder and when she cocked her head to catch them he straightened and moved his gaze to her apartment. She had no idea how Beverly could say that Sheldon liked her. All she knew was that she felt disappointed; not that she thought he’d declare his undying love but she wanted something tangible. Of course the bigger question was why she even cared if he liked her or not since they were so completely different it’s not like they could ever be a couple.

*Maybe it’s my locus looking for validity again.* Penny gave a snort and took a gulp of wine.

“What?” asked Sheldon.

“Nothing,” said Penny with a little smile. She let the wine swirl lazily in the glass. “You called me stupid.”

“No, I said you were gullible. You called me stupid.”

“Yeah.”

Sheldon frowned. “I’m not stupid, Penny.”

“Neither am I.”

“I never said—”

“You never said yadda-yadda. I know. Sheldon, believe it or not you don’t know everything.” His right eye twitched. “I mean there are things out there that we don’t know and I’m not gullible for believing in them.” She smiled. “I’m a dreamer. Just like you.”

“Hardly,” he snorted.

“What about your graviton thingies? You said you know they’re there.”

“Because science says they should be there,” he sniffed.
“‘Should’ doesn’t mean ‘are’, sweetie.”

He pursed his lips. “I think we’re off point.”

“That’s right. You were here to comfort me.” She set down her wine and patted the seat next to her.

“I thought I had comforted you,” he replied.

“Booboos and Ouchies, Sheldon,” she cooed and presented him with wide eyes.

A twitch passed over his mouth and there was a definite hesitation before he stepped over and gingerly sat on the edge of the couch.

“There there,” he said awkwardly. He reached out to pat her shoulder but thought twice about it and instead waved his hand over her arm as if they were separated by a force field. Penny looked at him and in that moment their eyes met.

“Sheldon’s here,” he said and then gave what she considered to be the worst attempt at a comforting smile she’d ever seen.

And yet it was perfect.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: History of American Football; The Demon-Haunted World (Carl Sagan); Scientific Method;

Alternetorg: Why men do stupid things—the psychological appeal of prostitutes

NFL.com: NFL Beginner’s guide to Football
“Alright, what’s going on?” Penny said with a smile to the busboy.

“What?” Brad said innocently although he couldn’t quite contain his giddiness.

“You’ve been hovering near my station like a bee. Now give.”

Brad rested the dish tray against his hip.

“You mean you don’t know who you’ve been serving?”

Penny looked over at her tables: two elderly men, a family of four, a twenty-something couple.

“Looks normal to me,” she shrugged.

Brad indicated the older gentlemen with a subtle nod of his head.

“That’s Leonard Nimoy,” he said quietly.

“Which one?”

“The one on the right.”

“Okay. Next question: who’s Leonard Nimoy?”

The young man dropped his jaw.

“‘Who’s Leonard Nimoy?’” he said incredulously. “You know, Spock.”

Again Penny glanced at the older gentleman. Lean with more salt than pepper in his hair and glasses Penny remembered Sheldon mentioning a ‘Spock’ on that Star Trek show he watched. *Betcha that doll on his desk is Spock.* Actually, there were quite a few toys in the living room now as if it took Leonard coming to the apartment to give Sheldon permission to personalize his own home.

“I wonder if I could get Sheldon an autograph?” She turned to Brad. “No offence but he’s a real Spock nut and—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m planning on taking his silverware,” the busboy said with a slight blush. “No telling but I’ve got a collection of famous people’s cutlery at home.”

Penny grinned. “Okee then.” She got the bill and put it in the billfold and went to the Nimoy table.

“Here is your bill,” she said cheerily and set it on the table. “Will you be paying by cash, credit or debit?”

“You’re welcome.” She paused for a moment. “I realize this is your own time but I was wondering if you’d sign an autograph for my friend?”

Leonard smiled kindly. “You let me eat in peace and asked politely. How can I refuse?” He took his napkin and turned it to the clean side. “Pen?” Penny handed him one from her apron. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Sheldon. He’s a big fan. He watches Star Trek all the time and has a little you on his desk and he’s totally a scientist.”

“What kind?” Leonard asked as he wrote.

“A theoretical physicist.”

“Spock would approve,” he said with a little smile and handed her the napkin and pen.

“Thank you so much,” Penny beamed. Leonard then reached for his wallet and slipped two twenties into the billfold. “I’ll be right back with your change.”

“No need,” he replied.

“Thanks again. Have a good afternoon.”

Leonard’s eyebrow arched as he watched the waitress head back to the kiosk.

“If Nurse Chapel smiled like that Spock wouldn’t have had a chance,” he said.

XxX

The elevator doors opened and Penny emerged keys in hand only to spot a note on her door. Written in Sheldon’s succinct handwriting it let her know that she had a package waiting for her at 4A. She crossed over and knocked out ‘shave-and-a-haircut’, leaving off the last two knocks. There was a long pause and then came two final knocks from the other side before the door opened to reveal a frowning Sheldon.

“Next time, finish your knock,” he said formally and handed her a clipboard and pen.

“I seriously still have to sign for packages?” she said incredulously as she took the proffered items and read over the waiver. “I trust you, you know.”

“Ah, if only it was that simple,” said Sheldon, causing Penny to roll her eyes.

“Fine.” She signed the paper. “Here you are Mr. Grumpypuss. What’s with the ‘tude anyways?”

“I’m a doctor not a mister and I don’t have a ‘tude,” he said, making the quotation marks with his fingers. “I’m working on a posit I had started when Ramona was here and I—” A rumble of a low-bass came from Sheldon’s ceiling. “And that infernal woman above me keeps interrupting with her surround sound.”

“Sorry sweetie. Maybe Leonard or you could go see her and—”

Sheldon pursed his lips as he set his clipboard down on the coffee table and took up Penny’s package.

“Oh, Leonard’s seeing her right now—apparently he has to install her wifi.” Sheldon arched an eyebrow as he handed Penny her box. “You’ll note the words ‘her wifi’. You might want to look into that sometime.” Penny stuck out her tongue.
“Always great talking with you, Sheldon.”

“If the topic were trains I would say the same.” Again a low rumbling came from above and he looked skyward with a scowl.

“Come on, let’s go talk to her” Penny said and Sheldon grabbed his keys from the bowl and locked his door. The two neighbors walked to the stairs and began to climb. “Now remember, be nice.”

“When am I rude?” Sheldon replied.

“Hoo boy,” Penny sighed.

They got to 5A and Penny knocked at the door.

“You don’t abandon your knocks here,” Sheldon pointed out only to rub his arm with a scowl as Penny elbowed him lightly.

The door opened and Alicia stood before them in all her thinness and clingy clothing.

*Damn she looks good.* “Hey,” said Penny with mock enthusiasm. “Is Leonard here?”

“Sure. Come in.” Alicia held the door so the pair could enter. “Sorry the place is such a mess. You know how it is when you first move in while doing a bunch of photo shoots.”

Penny glanced at the apartment with its chic furniture and kickass television and stereo system. There wasn’t a magazine out of place.

“No need to apologize,” replied Sheldon. “I had to endure Leonard moving in and Penny’s apartment is always chaotic.”

“Not that chaotic,” Penny said, trying to laugh it off.

“I’ve seen homes hit by tornadoes that look—”

“Anyhoo,” Penny cut in. “Sheldon, I believe you have something to say to Leonard?”

“What is it?” asked the short physicist as he was hooking up Alicia’s computer.

“I need you to stop what you’re doing, undo what you did last night and return to our apartment,” Sheldon said evenly.

Leonard cocked his head. “And why should I do that?”

“Because Alicia obviously doesn’t understand how the volume control works on her television. Good Lord, in our living room it sounds like we’re being buzzed by a jetliner.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Alicia said with wide blue eyes. “Is my tv bothering you?”

“That’s what he said,” Penny said a tad brusquely.

“Well I like to be on friendly terms with my neighbors,” Alicia continued and gave Sheldon a devastating smile.

“Well turning down your television and refraining from jumping up and down on your bed would be helpful for starters,” Sheldon said evenly.
“Oh my God, you hear me in bed?” gasped Alicia.

“Up and down, squeak-squawk squeak-squawk. It’s relentless,” tsked Sheldon. “Really, if you’re so hell bent on exercising buy a gym membership.”

“Sheldon,” Leonard winced. “She doesn’t need—never mind.”

“I’m going to make noise,” Alicia said with a slight frown. “We’re in an apartment building so get used to it.”

“I’m not sure if the superintendent went over the neighbor relations and responsibilities in the lease but in case he hasn’t I’d like to remind you that there is a noise ordinance in order that all residents can enjoy their abodes in relative peace,” said Penny. Sheldon looked at her in surprise. “And quit leading Leonard and the rest of the guys on.”

“I’m not leading anyone on,” Alicia growled as she folded her arms across her chest.

“She’s not leading me on,” Leonard agreed.

“No, if anything it’s his libido trying to deceive his rational mind,” said Sheldon.

“Especially since how often have you heard Alicia on the tramp-oline?” Penny asked Leonard. “Doesn’t mean she’s gonna sleep with you too.”

“That’s correct,” said Sheldon. “After all, Penny’s had well over twenty lovers and yet she turned you down,” he pointed out to his roommate.

“Sheldon!” Penny gasped.

“And you call me a tramp?” Alicia laughed harshly.

Penny thrust her package in Sheldon’s hands and approached the other woman.

“Listen lady, these are my friends and you’re gonna back off.”

“Your friends?” Alicia said with a smarmy smile. “Give me a break. So they do stuff for me. They’re happy. I get stuff. Who cares?”

“I care,” growled Penny.

“Sure you do. You’re just like me: showing a little attention and t-and-a to get what you want. Like you really give a rat’s ass about them.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “You’re way out of line.”

“Well, what are you going to do about it, bitch?” snapped Alicia.

Penny came nose to nose with the woman and at the sound of an imaginary bell they began to scrap. Sheldon stayed where he was at the door and Leonard put down the wifi unit and came to join him.

“I’m not sure of the protocol,” said Sheldon as he watched the two women rolling around the floor pulling hair, cursing and tossing wild punches. “I’ve never intervened in an altercation before. Usually I’m the one being assaulted.”

“Break it up,” Leonard said. The women kept fighting. “Well, we tried.”
Sheldon pursed his lips. He set down Penny’s package and took a step forward.

“Alright ladies, that’s enough,” he said with two sharp claps of the hand. “Penny! Alicia! Enough!” He turned to his roommate. “Leonard, grab Penny.”

Leonard came over and the two men pried the Nebraskan off of Alicia. Like a cat Alicia sprang up and tossed a haymaker. Sheldon tried to shield Penny and in that moment felt a crack to his nose and searing pain. Immediately he let go of Penny and cupped his nose.

“She hit me!” he garbled

Immediately the room came to a standstill.

Sheldon pulled his hands away from his nose.

“I’m bleeding!” he gasped and promptly fainted.

“Oh balls,” grumbled Penny who went to her knees. “Come on sweetie,” she said softly.

“Sheldon, you’ve gotta get up.” His eyes fluttered and then he frowned in pain. Penny hooked his arm and slowly got him to his feet. “Let’s get you to a doctor.”

“God, I’m sorry,” said Alicia. Penny glared at her but said nothing as she led Sheldon to the door.

Leonard picked up Penny’s package and went to follow them out before turning to Alicia.

“You might want to call someone about the wifi,” he said. “And for the record Penny is our friend.” He paused. “And welcome to the building.” He closed the door behind him.

After her shower Penny put on her comfy fleece pants and red tank top and flip-flopped her way to the living room. She looked over her work station and prepared for a night of labor when Sheldon came to mind.

“Should really look in on the guy,” she said and went to his apartment. She knocked, this time adding the last two knocks to her routine. Sheldon opened the door and Penny did her best not to wince at the amount of bruising on his face and the bandage across his nose.

“Hey,” she said. “Just checking in to see how you are.”

“Alive,” he said somewhat nasally.

“Alive is good,” she agreed. “So how was work?”

“Tedious. I was inundated with questions concerning my appearance.”

“It happens when people care, y’know.”

Sheldon snorted. “Hardly. Apparently their interest was to know who had ‘snapped’ for the purpose of congratulating him or her.”

“Seriously?” Penny said incredulously.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sheldon said with a shrug. “It’s not like I haven’t experienced this before.”

Penny folded her arms across her chest. “Yeah but this isn’t primary school.”
“I was similarly harassed in university when I was finishing my second doctorate. Fortunately I was shielded from bullying for my first four years of post-primary education.”

“Sorry sweetie.” Again he shrugged.

“It’s my destiny to be a misunderstood giant among men,” Sheldon sighed.

“And don’t forget humble,” Penny said with a crooked smile.

“Penny, I wouldn’t say it if it wasn’t true,” he tsked.

“Okay genius I’ll let you get back to your geniusing ways.” She caught the slight pursing of his lips and grinned in response. “‘Night.”

“Penny.” She turned to the physicist who glanced briefly at the ground before affixing his stare to her shoulder. “How’s your eye?”

“Better after the ice and Tylenol,” Penny said. “The shiner really gave me a boost at work. I got a lot of ‘pity tips’.”

“Well I don’t recommend repeating the battered look.”

“What’s with battered? These are battle wounds, mister.”

“Doctor.”

Penny winked at him and walked back to her door.

“Penny.”

She turned around. “Yeeos?”

“Thank you for looking in on me,” he said earnestly.

“It’s what friends do.”

“Aside from involving each other in brawls,” he amended.

“Rough with the smooth, Sheldon.” Here she smiled. “Thanks for having my back.”

“It was either that or bailing you out of jail.” Sheldon slipped out of his apartment slippers and put on his hallway ones before closing the apartment door behind him.

“Hey, she hit me first,” Penny sniffed.

“Regardless, you’d both be in jail for assault.” Sheldon followed his neighbor to her apartment door. “Although I suppose it would have provided you experience should you be offered a jailhouse role.”

“Yeah yeah.” Penny sat down on her couch. Sheldon noticed the containers of sparkly stuff and a glue gun.

“What are you doing?”

“Making Penny Blossoms,” she said proudly as she held up a sparkly flower barrette.

“For what purpose?”
“I need extra pocket money for Christmas.”

Sheldon snorted derisively.

“What?” Penny said with a frown as she took up her glue gun and commenced assembling a barrette. “I thought you’d approve of me not going into debt.”

“I fail to see how making hair accessories is in any way a viable sideline.”

“Well, Dr. Smartiboots I met this lady who runs a shop in Old Town and she wanted to sell my Penny Blossoms and in one week I made a hundred and fifty six dollars.”

“I see.” Sheldon observed her working away. “How many barrettes do you make per day?”

“About twenty.”

“And how much profit do you make off each Penny Blossom?”

“I’m not sure. About fifty cents, I guess,” she shrugged.

Sheldon sighed. “First of all you’re hardly going to make a viable business if you’re guess-and-by-gollying your numbers.”

“It’s not a business. It’s just a few bucks in my pocket,” Penny countered and then paused. “Unless you think this could be a business?”

“At ten dollars a day times five days a week times fifty two weeks a year your before taxes profit would be two thousand six hundred dollars.”

Penny’s eyes widened in shock. “Why do I have to pay taxes?”

“It’s income. Besides I’m sure your shopkeeper will have you on her books so it’s in your best interest to keep the IRS apprised of your little endeavor.”

“Damn,” Penny sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I can’t even buy a break.”

“Based on your income from waitressing I believe you’re still under the poverty threshold so an additional source of income shouldn’t push you into the next tax bracket,” Sheldon said evenly.

“Thanks for reminding me,” she grumped.

“You’re welcome.” Silence save the sounds of Penny working. “Of course you’d never need the extra money if you didn’t participate in Saturnalia.”

Penny cocked an eyebrow. “Satur-what?”

Sheldon clasped his hands behind his back. “In the pre-Christian era, as the winter solstice approached and the plants died, pagans brought evergreen boughs into their homes as an act of sympathetic magic, intended to guard the life essences of the plants until spring. This custom was later appropriated by Northern Europeans and eventually it becomes the so-called Christmas tree.”

“Oh. Well, all I know is that I have to get my pagan ass back to Nebraska so we can carve up a bird and pass out presents.”

“Which I’m sure are bound to be disappointing.”

“Hey, it’s the thought that counts.”
“Oh really? Then tell me what thought was behind my parents giving me a motorized dirt bike when I was twelve?”

“Oh my God, they didn’t!”

“They did!” He paused to ponder her smile. “Your sarcasm is noted,” he said huffily. “And FYI I wanted a titanium centrifuge so I could separate radioactive isotopes.”

“Maybe Walmart was out,” Penny chuckled.

“Walmart doesn’t sell centrifuges.”

“Sarcasm, Sheldon.”

“And on that note,” he said with a frown.

“Aw, don’t go. It makes the time pass with you jibber-jabbering.”

“I don’t ‘jibber-jabber’ I converse.”

“Eh, potAto potAHto. Anyhoo you’re welcome to stay if you’ve got nothing else to do.”

“I’m a physicist. I’ve always got something to do,” Sheldon sniffed.

Penny glanced at her neighbor. “Okay, so what are you doing?”

“I’m working on a problem even as we speak.”

“So how’s it going?”

“It’s going,” he replied with a twitchy mouth.

“Maybe you need a break,” Penny suggested.

“Yes.” A thought came to him. “Perhaps I should do something menial.”

“You can always roll up your sleeves and give me a hand,” she offered.

“I suppose I could clean your apartment.”

“You’re not cleaning my apartment,” she said firmly. “Come on, you can help me with the Penny Blossoms.”

“Why should I assist?” he asked, puzzled. “You’re doing it wrong.”

“How am I doing it wrong?” Penny replied testily. “It’s just putting together a bunch of barrettes.”

“Where do I even begin?” Sheldon tsked. “Let me get my glue gun and I’ll show you how to optimize your manufacturing process.” He returned to his apartment.

“Not one of my better ideas,” Penny said to herself.

XxX

Leonard put in the new garbage bag in the kitchen receptacle before taking the full one and proceeding to the door. As soon as he opened it he was inundated with the sound of Penny and Sheldon singing away to what he thought was a sea shanty.
He went to her door and listened.

“That spanking full-rigger to New York was bound,” sang Sheldon.

“Way hey blow the man down,” Penny joined in.

“She was very well manned and very well found.”

“Give me some time to blow the man down!” they chorused.

Leonard smirked as he backed away.

“I’m not even going to ask,” he chuckled and went to the garbage room.

xTBBTx

“Son of a bitch,” a wide-eyed Howard cooed as he stared incredulously at Raj’s laptop.

“Whatever,” Raj replied listlessly as he took a big gulp of beer before slumping dejectedly on his couch. He knew it wasn’t a competition but damn it all this wasn’t supposed to happen!

“Who is she?” continued the engineer as his eyes scanned the email.

“Amy Farrah Fowler,” sighed Raj. “Or the Jeopardy answer to ‘who’d be weird enough to answer Sheldon’s personal ad?’”

“The chances of the two of them being on the same site are astronomical.”

“Ask Sheldon. He could probably do the math.”

Howard chuckled. “Listen to this: ‘Now, before this goes any further, you should know that all forms of physical contact up to and including coitus are off the table.’”

“How come Sheldon has a soul mate and I don’t?” groaned Raj.

“Probably because he doesn’t whine,” Howard replied distractedly as he began to type. “Uh oh, she wants to meet Sheldon.”

Raj sat up. “What do we do?” Howard looked at his friend.

“They have to meet. This is nothing short of destiny.”

“Or a catastrophe,” the astrophysicist warned. “You know Sheldon doesn’t have a deal.”

“I don’t know about that,” shrugged Howard. “Leonard thinks he might have the hots for Penny, remember?”

“Well who doesn’t?” Raj took a swig of beer. “Okay, if he has a thing for Penny why would he be interested in Amy?”

“Two reasons,” Howard said as he typed the return message to Amy. “One, Sheldon is a nerd. King of the Nerds. Penny would never be interested in a nerd. Ergo she’d never be interested in Sheldon. Two, since he hasn’t said anything to her he’s obviously smart enough to know that.”

“Okay, so then why do you keep hitting on Penny?” asked Raj.
“Because I’m a romantic,” Howard said earnestly. Raj rolled his eyes. “There. Amy wants to meet at six tonight. I’ve suggested a local coffee shop so we’ll see where it goes.”

Raj drained his beer and set the bottle on the coffee table. “I wonder what Amy’s like?”

“We’ll find out at six.” Howard leaned back and indicated the return email on the screen with his hand. “Operation: Bride of Frankenstein is a go.”

“God help us,” Raj breathed.

“Now all we have to do is animate Sheldon,” said Howard as he closed the laptop and the two men got off the couch.

XxX

Sheldon closed his mailbox and turned to see a tall man with long stringy black hair wearing a goatee and moustache enter the building carrying an amplifier and a guitar case. On his back was a blue hiker’s pack.

“Hey, man, you know which apartment’s Penny’s?” the man asked.

Immediately Sheldon straightened. “She resides on the fourth floor.”

“That’s right, 4B.” Sheldon pressed the elevator button. “The address is in my pocket.”

The elevator doors opened and the two men entered. Sheldon pressed the floor button and the pair rode in silence.

When the elevator arrived Sheldon got out first and proceeded to his door. He took his time fishing out his keys and turned his head inconspicuously to see the man as he put down his amplifier and knocked at Penny’s door. A moment and then it opened and Penny let out a joyous squeal.

“Justin! Oh my God!” Her arms were around his neck and she let out another happy squeal.

Sheldon unlocked his door and entered his apartment.

“Obviously they’re acquainted,” he said evenly as he took off his shoes and sprayed his feet.

“Is this everything?” asked Penny from the hall.

“Have guitar, will travel,” said this ‘Justin’ before Penny’s door closed.

Sheldon picked up his shoes and went to his room.

XxX

“So how was your trip?” gushed Penny as she waited for Justin to set down his gear.

“Good, good.” He laughed softly as again she hugged him. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

“No problem.” Here she mock-frowned and waggled a finger. “Only you pull a Christie and you’re out of here.”

“Christie? You mean Christie Jacobs?”

“Yup,” said Penny. “She packed a bag, came out here and proceeded to whore herself with my
neighbor’s friend. On My Bed.”

“Well at least she’s consistent,” Justin chuckled.

“Yu-P,” she replied with a roll of the eyes. “Enough of eww. So what’s going on with you?”

“Totally got a session tomorrow morning at eight.”

“That’s awesome!” Penny ventured to the kitchen. “Well you can practice here while I get dinner.”

“Just like the old times,” said Justin as he unzipped his guitar. “Well, except for skipping the aftersex.”

“Christie,” Penny warned with a smile on her face.

“So how long she last?”

“One night.”

Justin mock-winced. “That’s harsh.”

“She got my Care Bears sweaty,” Penny said as she pulled out a pot from the cupboard.

“Oh, well, when you put it that way,” he laughed.

“Shut your pie hole and play,” Penny chuckled.

XxX

Raj and Howard exited the elevator to the sound of guitar music coming from Penny’s apartment.

“Sounds live,” mused Raj as Howard knocked at 4A. “I never knew Penny could play?”

“She can play me all night long,” chuckled Howard just as the door opened to reveal Sheldon.

“Leonard’s not here,” he said evenly.

“That’s ok. We’re here to talk to you.”

“Oh. Alright.” Sheldon let them in and glared at Penny’s door before closing his own.

“Penny having a party?” asked Raj as he sprayed the bottoms of his shoes.

“No, her guest has a guitar,” replied Sheldon stiffly as he returned to his computer chair.

“Cool. Male guest or female guest?” Howard inquired innocently.

“Male.”

“Man, I can’t even buy a break,” tsked the engineer. “Anyways, on to business. Raj and I were on a dating website and for the hell of it we entered your vitals into the system and it spit out a match.”

Sheldon took a moment to process the information. “Psh,” he said at last.

“It’s true,” said Raj as he sat on the arm of the couch. “Her name’s Amy Farrah Fowler and she
wants to meet you.”

“If she was a match for me she wouldn’t be on a dating website,” sniffed Sheldon as he resumed reading his article on the laptop.

“Come on Sheldon, give her a chance.”

“No.”

“Does this have to do with Penny?” asked Howard as his finger rimmed the edge of the key bowl in an attempt to appear nonchalant.

“This has to do with the mass delusion that a computer algorithm can determine compatibility,” Sheldon said with a scowl.

“Think of it as scientific inquiry,” offered Raj.

“Again, no.” The guitar stopped and Penny and Justin’s laugh came across the hall. The guitar playing resumed.

“Well, I suppose we can all sit here and listen to the guy seduce Penny with his guitar,” shrugged Howard.

“What makes you think he’s seducing her?” said Sheldon crisply as he did his best to concentrate on the article he was reading. “Perhaps she hired a minstrel.”

“Sheldon, when a guy with a guitar comes over to a woman’s apartment it isn’t to sing children’s songs.” Howard made a ‘baw-chok-a-chok-a-baw-baw’ sound as he plucked at an air guitar.

Again the laughter from the apartment.

Sheldon pursed his lips and closed his laptop. “Let’s go.”

XxX

“What’s the protocol?” asked Sheldon as Raj, Howard and he got out of the astrophysicist’s car.

“No biggie,” soothed Howard. “Just say hi, buy a couple of coffees, sit down and chat.”

“But I don’t drink coffee,” replied Sheldon. “Nor do I sit in unfamiliar restaurants or cafés.” His mouth twitched. “And I don’t chat.” Howard looked helplessly at Raj.

“How about this,” said Raj. “Buy Amy and yourself a beverage, choose the best table available and converse.”

“The month has an ‘r’ in it. I’ll have a hot chocolate.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” said Howard as he opened the door and indicated with his hand that Sheldon should enter.

“Well for a boat to float the chocolate would have to be hot,” the physicist replied as he stepped into the café followed by his companions. He came to a standstill in the middle of the floor. “So, in a few minutes when I gloat over the failure of this enterprise, how would you prefer I do it? The standard I told you—”

“Sheldon Cooper?” said a woman’s voice. All three men turned to see a woman with shoulder length straight brown hair wearing glasses and a striped cardigan over two other shirts and a three
quarter length denim skirt with dark hosiery beneath.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper.” he amended.

“I’m Amy Farrah Fowler.”

“I see. Hello, Amy Farrah Fowler. I’m sorry to inform you that you have been taken in by unsupportable mathematics designed to prey on the gullible and the lonely.” He cocked his head. “You wouldn’t also by chance believe in psychic phenomena?”

“I find your line of inquiry baffling,” she replied evenly. “While I’m not opposed to the idea of a deity I find other potential sources of metahuman ability to be balderdash at best and out and out fraud at worst.”

“I already have a ‘Holy-roller’ mother in my life,” Sheldon warned. “So if you’re going to ‘Praise the Lord on High’ you’ve found the wrong conversational companion.”

“Whoa a minute. Who said anything about you being a companion, conversational or otherwise?” Amy narrowed her eyes. “I’m not one to be taken and ravished. I was expecting to meet an intellectual equal. You’re not like your profile.”

“I should think so given that I didn’t write it,” agreed Sheldon. “This was a juvenile attempt by my so-called friends to introduce me to you, my supposed ‘match’. But of course the website’s ability to create sound pairings is as precise as communicating with the dead or predicting the future.” He shook his head. “Instead of telling me the butler did it in the library with the candlestick I’m given the vague answer that the killer is a mammal,” he tutted as he turned to Howard. “We might as well continue our discussion about floating on chocolate.”

“I’m still up in the air about that one,” Howard said neutrally as he tried not to wither under Amy’s gaze.

“I see.” Sheldon turned to the newcomer. “Amy?”

“It depends,” she said seriously. “Solid chocolate would obviously keep you on the surface and semi-melted would have the consistency of quicksand. Extremely hot chocolate would be liquid enough to promote buoyancy while simultaneously being an uncomfortable place to stay in for any length of time.”

“More importantly, the question would be why someone would be in a vat of chocolate unless he was a rat,” Sheldon continued. “Then the bigger question would be where is the FDA inspection team and why hasn’t the facility been shut down?”

Silence.

“May I buy you a beverage?” asked Amy.

“Alright,” Sheldon replied.

The pair went to the counter.

“They’re alive! Alive! Alive!” Howard cackled softly to Raj.

“We may have doomed the human race,” Raj whispered back.

xTBBTx
Justin finished drying his hands and cut through Penny’s bedroom into the living room. He could smell the Chinese food but didn’t see any sign of it.

“Where’s the Chinese?” he asked.

“Across the hall,” replied Penny as she tucked her hair into a pony tail. “Sheldon always orders Chinese food on Fridays. Oh, and he texted me the cost of our order. I’ll cover this week and you’ll get next week.”

“Deal.” The pair exited her apartment and crossed the hall. Penny knocked her incomplete shave-and-a-haircut and entered.

“Hey guys,” she said brightly.

“Hi Penny,” said Leonard from his chair. Sheldon knocked twice on the fridge door before opening it to get the bottled waters.

Penny turned to Justin. “Take off your shoes and spray your feet.”

“You can just spray the bottoms of your shoes,” Leonard amended. “It’s okay.” Sheldon snorted. “You know we had an agreement about this at the weekly roommate meeting.”

“No, we had a discussion about it,” countered Sheldon. “You proposed. I countered. By right of the Roommate Agreement I settle all ties ergo the point should be moot.”

“No worries,” said Justin as he slipped out of his Adidas shoes and sprayed his feet. He set the can down and proceeded to the couch. “Hey,” he said to Howard and Raj.

“‘Sup?” Howard said in a ‘yo’ kind of voice. Raj for his part gave a thumbs up.

Justin slid by the pair and went to sit at the far end.

“No!” Leonard, Howard and Penny blurted, causing the man to freeze.

“What?” asked the musician.

“That’s where Sheldon sits,” explained Leonard.

“Sure,” Justin said after a slight pause.

Howard smiled. “It’s alright.” He turned to Raj. “Can you move for a sec?” The astrophysicist obliged. “You can sit here,” he said to Justin and moved to where Raj had been. For his part Raj put out a ‘what the hell?’ look of shock. “Raj, he’s a guest.” Raj pointed at Sheldon and Leonard. “Leonard sits there because he bought his chair and Sheldon gets his spot because he’s crazy.”

“I’m not crazy, my mother had me tested,” Sheldon said automatically as he came to the coffee table and set down the bottled waters before taking his seat.

“So anyways,” said Penny as she wheeled over Sheldon’s computer chair beside Leonard and sat. “Justin, this is Leonard, Sheldon, Howard and the mute guy’s Raj.”

“What brings you to Pasadena?” asked Leonard as he handed Justin his food packet.

“Looking for session work,” Justin replied. “I’m a musician.”

“Leonard’s also a musician,” said Penny as she popped open her own food container.
“I dabble with the cello,” the physicist said shyly.

“Cool stuff,” replied Justin. “I’m a guitarist by trade but I also fool around on the piano when I can.”

“I try to fool around just about anywhere,” chuckled Howard.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Never noticed, Howard.”

“Perhaps I’m being too subtle.”

“At-At Walkers are more subtle than you,” said Sheldon before taking a bite of chicken.

Justin cocked his head. “What’s that?”

“The giant combat troop transporters the Imperial Army used on the frozen planet of Hoth in The Empire Strikes Back,” explained Leonard.

Justin brightened. “Oh you mean the mechanical dinosaurs in the snow that Luke and the pilot dudes had to take down.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“That’s right,” replied Leonard.

“On what planet is he right?” scoffed Sheldon.

“Be nice,” Penny said as she pointed a fork at the lanky physicist.

“You keep insisting I’m impolite,” frowned Sheldon. “Your houseguest’s description of those ‘pilot dudes’ hardly justifies the Rebel Army’s evacuation efforts from Hoth and the subsequent loss of life.”

“So how did you swing that houseguest thing?” Howard asked Justin.

“I’ve known Justin for years back in Omaha,” replied Penny as she talked with her mouth full.

“We used to go out,” Justin added.

Leonard noted Sheldon’s back straighten but the lanky man said nothing.

“But of course you’re not going out now,” Leonard clarified.

“God no,” Penny laughed. “And it’s not like we ever really went out. We just saw each other for a while.” Howard made to speak. “Not a word,” she admonished.

“I was only seeking clarification,” the engineer said. “But I can infer with the best of them.”

“Ah,” said Sheldon after a moment to process. “So you engaged in coitus.”

“Coitus?” chuckled Justin.

“That was in the past,” Penny said quickly.

“But you’re seeing each other now,” Sheldon continued. “If, as you suggest, there was no pronounced paradigm shift from friends to coital partners how could Justin not expect the same to continue since you ‘see’ each other every day?”

“We’re not sleeping together, Sheldon!” Penny said adamantly.
“Let’s change the subject shall we?” Leonard said nervously.

“Oh, I’ve got one,” said Howard excitedly. “We’ve met Sheldon’s soul mate.”

Penny stopped chewing and glanced at Sheldon.

“Howard, we’ve all met my mother,” replied Leonard.

The engineer shook his head. “Not her. Amy Farrah Fowler. We all went to meet her and she really hit it off with Sheldon.”

“Amy and I share similarities but I wouldn’t say we ‘hit it off’,” amended Sheldon. “You make us sound like a baseball game.”

“Come on, Sheldon. How many times have you given your number to a woman you just met?” prodded Howard.

“She was interested in my research.”

“You talked about chocolate, psychics and the origin of the spatula.”

“Wait, you talked about psychics?” gasped Penny.

“She even used the same word Sheldon uses.” Howard made his face go blank. “Psychic phenomena are unabashed hokum.” He grinned. “Like I said, they’re a perfect match.”

“Wow,” Penny said neutrally before taking a sip of her water. Justin noted her funny look but said nothing.

Leonard looked to his roommate who stirred his chicken satay with his chopsticks in an agitated fashion.

“Well sometimes opposites can attract too, y’know,” Leonard said slowly. “We know this from basic magnetism.”

Howard pshed. “Only in science, my friend. Trust me, when it comes to dating like likes like.”


“No, what’s delusional is my involvement in such an inane point of discussion,” Sheldon tutted.

“New topic: Enterprise versus Star Destroyer. Discuss.”

“But of course the Star Destroyer would crush the Enterprise,” said Leonard. “The sheer size difference alone plus the swarm of Tie Fighters would make mince meat of the Enterprise.”

“I disagree,” said Sheldon. “While there is a size difference the Enterprise has superior shield capabilities and maneuverability. More importantly, Star Fleet officers are rigorously trained and only the best and brightest become captains as opposed to Star Destroyer commanders whose qualifications are a combination of being next in command after Darth Vader kills off your superior and rating higher than ‘Storm Trooper’ on an aptitude test.”

As the conversation went back and forth Justin glanced at Penny who gave a half shrug.

“You get used to it,” she said before taking another forkful of food.

XxX
“What time are you getting up tomorrow?” asked Penny as she came out of her bedroom in her red sleep shorts and pink tank top.

“Seven,” replied Justin as he lay out his blankets on her couch. “Gotta be at the studio by ten.”

“Okay, well I won’t be up so—”

“Obviously. It’s before noon.”
She stuck out her tongue. “Just keep it down, smartiboots. ‘Night.”

“So you and Sheldon, huh?”

Penny froze before turning in the doorway to her friend.

“Excuse me?” she asked, flushing.

“Come off it, Pen. You practically had a stroke when Howard mentioned this Amy chick,” said Justin as he fluffed his pillow a couple of times before tossing it on the couch.

“It just took me by surprise,” Penny countered. “I mean I didn’t think he was the type to give a girl his number, y’know?”

“Do you have his number?”

“Yeah.”

Justin smiled. “Well there ya go.”

Penny leaned against the doorway. “Justin, he was sick and he needed someone to care for him.” Here she frowned. “Why are we talking about this anyways?”

“Because I’m wondering when ‘Big Ol’ Five’ is gonna put the moves on him.”

“He’s not into that,” Penny countered. Her shoulders slumped. “Apparently he’s into Amy.”

“They just met. Sheldon doesn’t seem the type to believe in the love at first sight crap.” Justin chuckled. “I mean they talked about spatulas for Christ’s sake.”

“In Sheldonease that could be foreplay,” said Penny.

Justin took off his shirt and slipped under the covers. “Well I don’t know Sheldonease but I know enough to know when a dude’s asking a chick if she’s banging another guy it means he’s interested.”

Silence.

“You think so?” Penny said quietly.

“Yu-P.” More silence. “You gonna explain to me how a cheerleader’s got the hots for the Star Wars geek?”

“I don’t have the hots for Sheldon,” she scoffed. “All I know is that he’s really different.” Pause. “I don’t want to scare him off.”

“Well whatever you’re doing you’ve got his attention,” said Justin as he put an arm under his pillow. “The question is what are you going to do with it?”
“Yeah.” Penny made to close her door.

“Pen.”

“Yeah?”

“Be sure you want this ‘cause you’ll fuck him up if you don’t.”

She closed the door leaving Justin in darkness.

xTBBTx

Yahoo!Answers: Can I float in chocolate?
The Cricket Dilemma


Reference to: ‘The Bozeman Reaction’; ‘The Lizard-Spock Expansion’

xTBBTx

“You were awesome,” Penny grinned at Justin as the pair rode the elevator to her floor.

“Thanks,” he replied. “The guys I met at the studio were awesome to let me jam with them at the club before the show.” He smiled at Penny. “Doubt I’ll be an ‘A’ list musician but I think I can pull off this session work life.”

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short. You’re totally talented.”

The elevator doors opened and in front was Leonard and Raj looking around the floor.

“Lose something?” asked Penny as both she and Justin scanned the floor as they tentatively stepped out.

“A cricket,” Leonard replied distractedly.

“Sheldon doing another experiment or something?” Penny pulled out her keys and went to her door.

“It’s a bet,” said Howard from the upper stairwell, making Penny jump.

“Crap Howard!”

“Let the record show that I gave you a thrill,” he teased as he came down the stairs. “No cricket up there,” he said to Leonard.

“You bet to see who catches it first?” asked Justin.

“Hardly,” sniffed Sheldon as he came down the hallway towards his apartment. “Howard and I have a bet as to the species of the cricket. Whereas he believes it’s a common field cricket, from the number of chirps per minute and the ambient temperature in the apartment I know it has to be a snowy tree cricket. It’s not down here by the way.”

Justin was amazed. “How do you know that?”

At once Leonard and Howard groaned. For his part Sheldon seemed to rise in stature and his hands clasped behind his back.

“In eighteen ninety, Emile Dolbear determined that there was a fixed relationship between the number of chirps per minute of the snowy tree cricket and the ambient temperature. A precise relationship that is not present with ordinary field crickets.”

“Anyways, it must be down the elevator shaft,” said Leonard.

“Wait, we haven’t ruled out Penny’s apartment,” said Howard. “I’ll check her bedroom.”
“Nice try, Howard,” the waitress chuckled and opened the door for Justin so he could move in his guitar and amplifier. The musician stepped in and stopped.

“Found it,” he said with a bit of a laugh.

“Really?” said Penny. “How can you see it without the lights?” She slid past him and flicked the switch.

“Don’t need a light when it made a nice crunching sound under my shoe.”

“Quick, man, your shoe!” demanded Sheldon.

“Sheldon, he’s not giving you his shoe,” Penny said firmly.

“But it’s the only way we’ll know for sure what it is,” the physicist protested.

“I’ll tell you what it is: it’s dead.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Your inquisitive nature leaves a lot to be desired.”

“As does your whacked need to be right about everything,” Penny countered.

“Well to be fair there is a thousand dollar comic book on the line,” said Howard as the four scientists gathered around the entrance to Penny’s apartment.

“A thousand bucks for a comic book?” gasped Penny.

“Action Comics number one, the first appearance of Superman, is valued at more than two point eight million,” said Sheldon.

“Can you believe that?” she asked Justin.

“You’re talking to a person who’d give his eyeteeth to own a nineteen forty nine Fender Broadcaster guitar for only three hundred and seventy thousand bucks,” he grinned.

“You’re all weirdoes,” Penny chuckled as she set down her purse on the counter.

“So how was practice?” Leonard asked Justin.

“Wasn’t a practice. I had a pre-gig gig and Penny came with me.” He eyed Sheldon. “Tried to invite ya but you weren’t around.”

“Not that I would have gone,” replied the lanky physicist. “I sometimes find the typical conversation level of sixty to seventy decibels too loud for comfort.”

“That’s only when you hear things that contradict you,” snorted Howard, garnering a glare.

“Too bad. There’s this totally happening jazz bar in Weller Court you should check out,” said Justin as he sat on the couch.

Raj whispered into Howard’s ear.

“The Blue Whale?” Howard interpreted.

“Totally. Actually Dragan Rusic is playing tonight and he’s totally a sick contemporary artist. You should check him out,” said Justin. “I’d go but I’ve got a session tomorrow morning at eight.”
“Well it’s nine now,” said Leonard as he checked his watch.

“You could always do an autopsy on ol’ Jiminy here,” Penny smirked.

Howard, Raj and Leonard looked at each other.

They all gave a ‘see ya’ and went to the elevator leaving Sheldon standing at the door.

“What’s up buttercup?” asked Penny.

“I’m waiting for the cricket corpse so I can do an ‘autopsy’,” said Sheldon evenly.

“It was a joke, Sheldon.”

“No, it was an option. Raj, Howard and Leonard declined. I accepted.” He stuck out his hand.

“The corpse.”

“No worries,” said Justin as he unlaced his shoe and slid it off. He turned it upside down and grimaced. “Dunno what you’re gonna get from that.”

“Fortunately I have a standing magnifying glass, scalpels and micro tweezers,” said Sheldon as he crossed over and took the shoe.

“If an option is what you need I can give you another one,” said Penny. “You can come here and hang out with us.” She glanced at Justin and gave him a ‘help me out’ look.

“Totally,” Justin agreed.

Sheldon checked his watch “I have an engagement with Amy Farrah Fowler at nine thirty via Skype.” He raised an eyebrow in thought. “As a doctor in biology perhaps she could assist me with the dissection.”

“A neurobiologist. Inferior to theoretical physics but I suppose someone has to take up the softer sciences.” He glanced at Justin’s shoulder. “I’ll have your shoe back shortly.”

“A doctor, too,” sighed Penny after Sheldon left.

“It’s no biggie,” Justin said encouragingly although he felt less than sure. “I mean my dad’s a mechanic and my mom’s a nurse. People come together because they like each other not what they do.” He snorted. “Well unless he’s a millionaire and she’s a gold digger.” He noted Penny’s downcast look. “If you want to skip the misery you can always ask him out.”

“I dunno if I want to go out with him,” she said honestly. “But at the same time the thought of him going out with this Amy chick makes me want to…. .”

Want to… .”

Penny gave him a grim smile before she got up and went to her bedroom.

A few minutes later Sheldon appeared at the open door wearing latex gloves and carrying Justin’s shoe.

Knock Knock Knock “Justin.”

“Just put it by the door,” the musician said as he was in the middle of making his bed on the
Knock Knock Knock “Justin.”

Justin looked up to see Sheldon standing at the apartment’s threshold.

“You okay?”

“Of course I’m okay,” Sheldon said dismissively. He gave three quiet knocks and mumbled Justin’s name before taking a step into the apartment. “Where’s your other shoe?”

“Over here,” replied Justin as he indicated the shoe by the head of the couch.

“Then why did you want me to put this one by the door? Good Lord, they’re sold as a pair.” Sheldon crossed over and placed the shoes together. He stood and glanced around the apartment. “Good night,” he said and turned to go.

“Wait, you wanna say goodnight to Penny?” asked Justin.

“Amy is waiting,” replied Sheldon. “Besides, Penny isn’t in my immediate vicinity and I refuse to shout.” The physicist exited and closed the door.

A frown covered Justin’s forehead as he stared at the door.

“No good can come of this,” he muttered.

XxX

Leonard turned the lock and entered 4A. Sheldon was on the couch reading a magazine.

“Any luck with the cricket?” Leonard slipped off his shoes and set them to the right of the door.

“No,” replied Sheldon as he read. “Unfortunately its exoskeleton was too badly crushed for a proper identification and there isn’t enough available data on smushed internal cricket anatomy.”

“Imagine that,” said Leonard. He went to the couch and flopped down. “Well my night was absolutely bizarre.” Silence. “Sheldon,” he prompted.

“Oh, you wish to engage in social blather,” replied the lanky physicist as he put down his particle physics magazine. He stared intently at his roommate’s shoulder. “So how was your night?”

“Weird,” Leonard said awkwardly. *And getting weirder yet….* “Howard actually picked up a woman.”

“I’m impressed. I never would have thought Howard capable of lifting a six year old child much less an adult.”

“No, I mean he engaged in a social exchange that resulted in his leaving the bar with a woman potentially for the purpose of coitus.”

Sheldon thought about it before snorting. “That’s even less likely.”

“And she was pretty, too.” Leonard sighed. “Sheldon, what’s wrong with me?”

“Well, apart from being myopic, you’re short, lactose intolerant, an experimental physicist—”

“Okay Sheldon.” Silence. “I mean I’m a nice guy. I’m a hell of a lot less creepy than Howard and
yet he’s getting laid and I’m home with you.”

“Leonard, if you’re asking me to engage in coitus I must decline,” Sheldon said evenly.

“What?! I wasn’t asking to sleep with you,” stammered Leonard. “I just meant that I’m here alone with you—in a hetero sense—instead of with a woman.”

“Perhaps you stink,” said a woman’s voice from across the room.

“Who the hell’s that?” asked Leonard as he sat up on the couch and squinted at the open laptop on Sheldon’s desk.

“Amy Farrah Fowler,” Sheldon answered.

“O-kay. So why is the laptop over there. Shouldn’t you be chatting or something?”

“I was conducting a dissection on the coffee table so there wasn’t room for the laptop.”

“But you’re not dissecting now,” Leonard said exasperatedly.

“His propensity for vulgar language and stating the obvious may be further reasons why he’s been unable to pair-bond with a woman,” said Amy.

“I’m not vulgar,” Leonard countered. “You just startled me.”

“Ah,” nodded Amy. “I engaged you amygdala. Earlier studies have shown that unlike normal language, which relies on the outer few millimeters in the left hemisphere of the brain, expletives hinge on evolutionarily ancient structures buried deep inside the right half.”

“Uh, sure,” said Leonard.

“Amy’s a neurobiologist,” explained Sheldon.

“She’d have to be,” sighed Leonard as visions of his mother came to mind.

Amy cocked her head. “From a neurobiological standpoint, Leonard, you may be alone because your psychological state is causing an actual pheromone-based stink of desperation.”

“I don’t stink,” Leonard countered adamantly.

“Aside from an inordinate amount of hair gel his hygiene practices are adequate,” agreed Sheldon.

“Yes, but you’re not searching for a suitable male to fertilize your eggs,” said Amy. “Were such a state hypothetically to occur you might have a different appraisal of your roommate.”

Sheldon nodded. “So I’m not the best candidate for this. I’ll go ask Penny if you smell funny,” he said and made to get off the couch.

“No!” blurted Leonard. “It’s okay. I’ll just be alone forever.” His phone rang and he answered. “Hello?”

“A sound decision,” said Sheldon.

“Just hang on a sec, Howard…You what?!…Okay, we’ll be right there.” Leonard hung up. “Sheldon we have a Defcon situation.”

“Oh alright.” Sheldon turned to the laptop. “Amy, apparently Howard is suggesting we have a
nuclear situation.”

“That doesn’t interest me,” replied the neurobiologist. “Goodnight, Sheldon Cooper.” The laptop screen went black.

“So what’s the situation?” asked Sheldon as he got up from the couch and proceeded to get his tan jacket from the back of his computer chair.

“He was kinda general,” said Leonard while slipping into his running shoes. “Something about getting the Mars Rover stuck or something like that.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “That sounds very specific—and illegal.”

“Let’s just find out what it is.”

“Leonard, my mother warned me about associating with a bad crowd and engaging in illegal activities,” said Sheldon as he put on his shoes.

“We’re not a bad crowd,” Leonard assured him. “And let’s not judge until we know the situation.” He grabbed the keys from the bowl and both men stepped out of the apartment.

“Query,” said Sheldon as his roommate locked the door. “I thought you said Howard was about to engage in coitus. How is that related to the Mars Rover?”

“Believe me, if the Rover’s really stuck the government will give Howard more coitus than he can handle,” said Leonard as both men proceeded down the stairs.

xTBBTx

“Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree,” Penny sang obliviously off-key as she adjusted the branches of her mini tree that sat on her counter. She was excited about going back to Omaha. She could tell her family all about her Rent review. Except about how it sucked. All in all, she felt good about how this year was ending. For the first time she was standing on her own feet and had her own place.

She smiled to herself as she straightened the star at the top of the tree.

“And my own whackadood—”

CRASH!

Penny rushed behind the counter to her refrigerator and grabbed her baseball bat that was propped nearby before streaking to her door. She opened it to find the door to 4A kicked in.

“Hey dirt bags!” she yelled as she charged across and into the apartment. The would-be thief dropped Leonard’s laptop on the desk and backed away. From his side glance she understood that there was a second guy there and so the Nebraskan whacked the door jam testing her bat. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” she said crisply.

XxX

“So anyways, what do you want for dinner?” asked Leonard as he stood between Sheldon and Amy in the elevator.

“It’s Thursday, Leonard. You know it’s pizza night,” replied Sheldon.
“Yes, but we have a guest and maybe Amy would like something different.”

“Why would she want something different? It’s Thursday.” Sheldon shook his head. “Really, your logic baffles me sometimes.”

“No,” sighed Leonard. “What baffles me is why—”

“Get back here!” Penny’s angry voice from the hall.

The elevator doors opened and the three rushed out just as Penny darted by them and down the stairs waving a baseball bat. It took a moment for Sheldon to notice that his door had been kicked in before he took off after Penny.

“Penny!” he called as he rapidly descended, his heart pounding from more than his exertion. “Penny! Penny! Penny! Penny! Penny! Penny! Penny!”

He came down the final flight and caught sight of Penny standing outside the building’s door.

“That’s right assholes, you better run!” she shouted. “Next time I won’t have flip-flops!” She turned and caught sight of Sheldon and so entered the building. “Those assholes just broke into your—”

“I know what they did. What’s unfathomable is why you went after them,” Sheldon said angrily.

“It’s no biggie,” Penny countered, still irritated over the whole incident. “I heard them break in, grabbed the bat and went all Nebraska on them.”

“You could have been injured or worse,” Sheldon spat back as his eyes scoured his friend. “In fact your right forearm and knee are red.”

“Yeah, I fell when I got shoved.” Penny went to the elevator and pushed the button. “That combined with my wearing flip-flops down the stairs is why those bastards got away.”

“You’re missing the point,” Sheldon said icily.

“I get your point, Sheldon.” The elevator came and they both got in. “And what you’ve got to understand is that I can take care of myself.”

“You’re a waitress not a green beret.”

“I’m an actress and I was in the junior rodeo, remember?”

“Well this isn’t Nebraska,” snapped Sheldon. “What if one of the assailants had a gun?”

“Well they didn’t.”

“This time.” The elevator arrived at their floor and they exited.

“They’re not coming back, Sheldon.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they’ve got ‘Louisville’ stamped all over their bodies, that’s why,” Penny said as she tapped her hand a couple of times with the bat.

“Are you okay?” Leonard said to his neighbor in a mix of concern and awe.
“Fine, Leonard.”

“Good,” he replied, relieved. “I’ll call the police.” He pulled out his cell phone and stepped away from the group.

Penny looked at the woman who stared back, wide-eyed.

“Hey,” Penny said, trying to be friendly.

“Hoo,” Amy replied before putting a hand to her neck and clearing her throat. “I mean hello.” She leaned her head towards Sheldon. “Who is this delightful creature?”

“My neighbor, Penny,” he grumbled. “And she’s a pain in the buttocks.”

“With her sun-kissed hair, flawless skin and manly hands she’s nothing less than an Amazon reborn,” Amy gushed.

“Uh, thanks,” Penny said hesitantly with a weak smile. She took in Amy’s poker expression and polyester and wool outfit reminiscent of grandma. She knew who this woman had to be but wanted to be sure. “You’re Amy, right?”

“You know of me?” Amy said happily.

“Howard mentioned meeting you.”

“Howard is the short, Jewish man who lives with his mother, correct?”

“You forgot his creepy, candy coating,” smirked Penny.

“Fortunately Sheldon was there,” agreed Amy. “He really is quite the charmer.”

“Yeah, he’s something alright,” replied Penny. She looked to Sheldon and blinked. *How come she calls you Sheldon and I was stuck at Dr. Cooper?*

“Yes, I’m charming,” Sheldon scowled. “Now can we get back to point i.e. Penny’s suicidal behavior?”

“I’m not suicidal, Sheldon.” Penny narrowed her eyes. “Homicidal maybe.” She did her best to imitate one of his exaggerated smiles.

“Better not be,” said Leonard as he hung up. “Police are on their way.”

“I shall survey the destruction,” said Sheldon as he pushed open his door. “Amy, you could assist me by documenting my findings.”

“I caught them in the act,” Penny said. “They didn’t have a chance to take anything.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Sheldon said absently as he stepped into the apartment. “Lord knows after your irrationality you hardly make a sound witness.”

“What he means to say is ‘thank you, Penny,’” Leonard interpreted as he frowned at the back of his roommate.

“Yes, thank you Penny for not ending up a bloody pulp on my floor after perpetrating something so extremely foolhardy,” Sheldon called out to the hall. “Come Amy, time for the neocortex to assess the workings of the less evolved amygdala.”
“Well this amygdala is gonna go clean up and have a shot of rum,” said Penny as she rested her bat on her shoulder and marched into her apartment.

“She’s remarkable,” Amy gushed before entering 4A.

Dr. Stephanie Barnett knew from the outset that accepting Howard’s proposal to ‘drive a car on Mars’ meant spending time with a horny scientist but what she didn’t count on was having Leonard Hofstadter drive her home from the Mars Rover facility. He seemed shy when she first met him at the jazz club but he sure made up for it when they arrived at Stephanie’s apartment building and proceeded to make out.

Tonight was supposed to be their second date. The first was at her place and so Leonard thought it appropriate to host the next one.

What he hadn’t counted on was Sheldon.

“Leonard,” greeted Sheldon as he came down the hall to see his roommate pouring gourmet pasta sauce into the frying pan which held sautéed vegetables. The lanky physicist turned his head and noted the slightly plump woman with blunt-cut shoulder length red hair wearing a black dress cut to mid thigh sitting on the couch. “Leonard’s female guest.”

“Hi,” Stephanie said and glanced at Leonard questioningly.

“Uh, Sheldon, what are you doing here?” he said.

“I live here. Why shouldn’t I be here?” Sheldon pulled out a sheet of paper from a file folder that was on his desk. “I’ve looked over your formal notice of having a non-familial female in the apartment and everything is in order. You may proceed with coitus.”

“Sheldon!” Leonard said, horrified. For her part Stephanie took a sip of wine in order to hide her grin.

“I’ll just leave the document on your desk,” Sheldon said. He turned to Stephanie. “On the form Leonard indicated you’re a doctor.”

“Yes, I’m a surgical resident at Freemont Hospital,” she replied.

“An acceptable trade,” Sheldon nodded.

Stephanie chuckled. “It pays the bills.”

“Sheldon,” Leonard interjected in an exasperated tone. “Stephanie and I were just about to—”

“Not now, Leonard. Dr. Stephanie and I were conversing,” Sheldon tsked. “So where did you do your residency?” he asked her.

“Lawrence Memorial in Galveston, Texas.”

Sheldon was delighted. “That’s where I was born!”

“Really?”

“What luck,” Leonard said flatly.

“I spent so much of my childhood at that hospital,” mused Sheldon. “When I was twelve I got to
ride there in a helicopter after a radiation mishap while I was building my own C.A.T. scanner.”

“You’re kidding,” Stephanie gasped.

“I got it to work for a brief period. I used my sister’s guinea pig to—”

There were two knocks at the door and then it opened.

“I smell pasta,” Penny said as she stuck her head in the apartment.

“Yes, we’re having spaghetti,” Sheldon replied crisply. He turned to his roommate. “I hope you made enough.”

Penny noted the woman on the couch. “Oh, I didn’t know you had a guest.”

“This is Dr. Stephanie Barnett,” Sheldon introduced. “She’s a surgical resident and Leonard’s coital partner.” Penny’s mouth dropped.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Stephanie. “It actually gets less shocking to hear the more Sheldon says it.”

“I don’t see what the fuss is all about,” tsked Sheldon. “As a physician you’re familiar with the means and methods of copulation.”

“That doesn’t mean she wants to discuss the how, Sheldon,” Leonard said as he picked up the pot to drain the spaghetti. *This date can’t get any worse….*

“Ah,” said Sheldon. “I was just finding a universal topic of discussion to be inclusive.” He turned to his neighbor. “While Penny isn’t a doctor I’m sure after the amount of sexual partners she’s had she could at least give an informed opinion.”

Leonard closed his eyes and winced. *On the other hand….*

“Oh my God!” Penny shrieked. She glanced at Stephanie. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“The numbers don’t lie,” Sheldon said evenly.

“I haven’t slept with everyone I’ve dated,” Penny said icily.

“I’ve already taken that into account. Statistically speaking you’ve had intercourse with—”

“Spaghetti’s ready!” Leonard said loudly.

“Why do you keep bringing this up?” snapped Penny. “Do you want to sleep with me, too?”

“For what purpose?” replied Sheldon. “Amy Farrah Fowler has already come up with a sound solution for having my offspring.”

“Your what?!”

“Amy pointed out that between the two of us, our genetic material has the potential of producing the first in a line of intellectually superior, benign overlords to guide humanity to a brighter tomorrow.”

“What the hell kind of crap is that?!” gasped Penny. “I mean you don’t even like people touching you and now you’re going to have sex?”
“Of course not,” scoffed Sheldon. “Our offspring will be the result of fertility experts in a lab with Petri dishes. All we require is a womb.”

“But you’ve just met!”

“To ensure genetic viability it’s best if Amy’s eggs are fertilized before age thirty.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “This has to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Sheldon frowned. “An obvious exaggeration. Given your occupation you’re subjected to inanities far beyond anything I could ever say.”

“No, I think ‘I want test-tube babies with a stranger’ is absolutely insane.”

“I’m not crazy,” snapped Sheldon. “My mother—”

“Needs a second opinion,” growled Penny, who then marched out the door.

Sheldon pursed his lips and his body was tense as if he was restraining himself from following her. Abruptly he spun on his heel and went to his room.

Stephanie looked to Leonard. “Were they a couple?”

“No.” He thought about it for a moment. “Kinda?”

XxX

Penny clicked off the television and set the remote next to her on the couch. She needed some time to cool off and thought a few episodes of Sex and the City was what the doctor ordered.

“Doctor,” she grunted. “Idiot’s more like it.”

She got up and began stripping out of her shirt as she walked to her bedroom. All she wanted to do was sleep and so she thought it best to shower tonight so she could stay in bed for an extra half hour. Penny stepped out of her pants and grabbed a fluffy white towel from her closet and went into the bathroom. She clipped up her hair and started the shower after adjusting the water temperature to her liking.

“Test-tube babies,” she grumbled. “Un-frigging-believable.” Tomorrow she was going to sit Sheldon down and get it through his thick skull what a stupid idea it was.

Plan B involved the baseball bat.

“Plan B’s simple,” said Penny as she stepped into the tub. “At least we’d both get something out of i—”

Her feet slipped from under her….

XxX

Sheldon sat impassively in his spot watching Star Trek. While it wasn’t Star Trek night he felt he needed something to ease his mind and ‘The Enemy Within’ fit the bill. As he watched he kept running through his altercation with his neighbor. Penny had a way of riling him that no other person possessed. She was irrational, superstitious, mule-headed. *And keeps calling me stupid.*

“ Evil Kirk,” he muttered.
Amy Farrah Fowler, in contrast, was logical and intellectual. Not up to his level, of course, but she could follow along in a stimulating discourse. She would be excellent breeding stock and it puzzled him that Penny didn’t see it.

“It’s not like I’d actually touch Amy,” he said. “Why would I want to touch anyo—”

“SHELDON!”

Immediately he pressed mute on the remote.

“SHELDON HELP!”

“Penny?” Immediately he raced to the door and grabbed her emergency key. He crossed the hall.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny?”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny?”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny?”

“I NEED HELP!”

“I’m entering your apartment,” he warned before inserting the key and turning the lock.

His eyes scoured the living room as he came in.

“Penny?” he called.

“IN THE BATHROOM!”

He took a breath and walked through her bedroom to the bathroom door.

Knock Knock

“GET IN HERE!”

He gave a final knock before opening the door. “Penny?”

“In the shower.”

Sheldon took a step and just past the shower curtain he caught sight of Penny’s head, shoulder and —

“Good Lord,” he said as he turned around. “Penny you’re naked.”

“I’m having a shower, genius. Only I fell and— Hey could you turn the shower off so I don’t drown?”

Sheldon took a couple of backward steps and reached blindly with his hand and turned off the water.

“Thanks.” He heard her wince.

“Are you alright?”

“I don’t think so. My shoulder feels dislocated.”
“Ah. I’ll call an ambulance,” he said as he pulled his phone from his pants pocket.

“No! Just get me out of the tub.”

“But you’re wet.”

Penny sighed. “Take the towel off the toilet seat.”

Sheldon took it and unfolded it to its full length. He turned towards Penny.

“Kay now wrap me in it and get me up,” she said. “And no peeking.”

“Interestingly enough there’s an entire history of heroes peeking at naked females,” he said evenly as he came to the edge of the tub.

“You’re not a hero,” she said as she sought his eyes with her own.

“I disagree. In Age of Conan I’m a sixty first level hero.” He leaned down with the towel held wide and in that moment he caught sight of lightly tanned skin and slightly puckered areolas most likely from the temperature change once the hot water was turned off. Overall her breasts were asymmetrical yet aesthetically pleasing. At some point Penny must have tanned topless; while there was a slight discoloration where a bikini top would lie there was a definite color to her breasts.

“I mean in real life.” Penny felt his arms around her with the towel.

“Need I remind you I’m here now?” he tsked. “Alright, put your good arm around my neck and on the count of three we’ll rise.” He pursed his lips for a second before he stuck a foot in the wet tub. “One. Two. Three.”

Penny did her best to come to a sitting position on the side of the tub. She leaned into Sheldon’s body and was surprisingly comforted by his arms around her and the smell of what she took to be baby powder.

“Ouch,” she winced. Sheldon stepped away from her and picked at his shirt gingerly with his fingers and held it away from his body.

“Your right humerus is no longer seated in the glenoid socket,” he said evenly.

“What?”

“Your shoulder’s dislocated.”

“No kidding.” Penny did her best to keep her right arm still while keeping up the towel to cover her front. “Kay, you’re gonna have to get me to the hospital.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“This hurts too much to wait. You’ll have to drive me.”

“I don’t drive,” Sheldon said firmly.

“You’ve got your learner’s permit.”

“Yes but I haven’t been behind the wheel of an actual vehicle.”

“First time for everything.” She stood up and the towel draped in front of her. “Right now I’ve
gotta get dressed.” She walked out of the washroom. “No looking.”

“I fail to understand your sudden obsession with modesty,” tsked Sheldon. He took in her firm yet slightly pronounced buttocks and a surprising Asian tattoo on her right cheek. “You’re in distress. I’m here because you called me. Am I supposed to conduct myself around your apartment by touch?”

“Just don’t turn into Howard,” she sighed as she sat on her bed.

“In what universe could I ever be Howard Wolowitz?” Sheldon said incredulously. “Obviously, the pain is muddling your rational thought.”

“Just get me some clothes,” Penny said with a grim smile.

“Alright.” He opened her dresser drawers. “Hmm. Due to your lack of organization I’m unsure which are your Thursday panties.”

“Don’t need panties. Just get me shorts and a shirt.”

“But it’s December. You’ll need pants.” He opened another drawer and pulled out a purple with little pink butterflies pair of fleecy pants.

“Not those,” Penny said, horrified. “Those are my comfy pants.”

Sheldon was puzzled. “Why wouldn’t you want to be comfortable now?”

“They’re not meant to be worn in public.”

“But you wear them at my apartment.”

“It’s still indoors.”

“The hospital is indoors.”

“Look, quit arguing and get me some black leggings on the right side of the drawer,” growled Penny.

Sheldon pulled out what she wanted. “I don’t see how these will be any warmer than shorts.”

“Just shut it and help.”

He went over and knelt on one knee before her.

“You’re still wet,” he said evenly. “I’ll need your towel.” He took an end and carefully patted down Penny’s legs and feet. “Query, why do you have the Chinese symbol for soup on your buttocks?”

“It’s not soup it’s ‘courage’.” Her cheeks flushed as she watched Sheldon dry between her legs. “And I told you not to look.”

“Point. My apologies. Although I have to say it is rather courageous of you to affirm your fondness for soup.” He set her towel high on her lap before gathering up her leggings. “Extend your left leg.” He slipped on the legging. “Now the right.” She complied and he repeated the process. “Another query, why are you acting self-conscious when you’ve adorned yourself with a tattoo in a location that’s better seen by others rather than yourself?”

“Because I don’t get naked for just anyone,” she said crisply.
“I never asked you to be naked,” he replied evenly as he pulled the leggings first over one knee, then the other. “You were having a shower when you fell. Your nudity is natural.” He shrugged. “If you wanted to surprise me I would have found you in the shower wearing a gorilla suit.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Sheldon stood up and after taking a moment to make sure her arm was steady Penny did the same. The physicist pulled the top of her leggings over her hips. “Grab my Nebraska t-shirt over there.” Sheldon glanced at the crumpled gray apparel on the floor near her closet.

“I’m sure there’s something cleaner in your drawer,” he said with pursed lips.

“Sheldon, you said comfortable, remember?”

He shook his head as he went to retrieve the top.

“Clean ‘comfy pants’ are a negative but soiled clothing is acceptable to be worn in public. How your mind works, woman,” he admonished lightly.

“Yeah yeah.” She smiled slightly as she saw Sheldon pick up her top with pinched fingers and carry it at arm’s length from his body. “It’s not contaminated.”

“In your dreams it isn’t contaminated.” He found the opening. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yup.” He carefully guided her head through the neck hole.

“I’ll turn the shirt so that I can get your arm into the sleeve,” said Sheldon and adjusted the top as best he could before slipping his hand underneath. He felt along her arm in order to find both her hand and the entrance to her sleeve. Now satisfied he had everything lined up he began to move the sleeve only to find it stuck on something. His hand moved to find what was the matter and found that the sleeve opening held not only Penny’s hand but also something warm and fleshy.

“What are you doing?” Penny gasped.

“Getting your arm in the sleeve.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t feel like my arm.”

“It’s your breast,” he confirmed.

“Maybe you should let it go.”

Sheldon’s hand repositioned and slowly he got the sleeve over Penny’s wounded arm.

“Not bad, Dr. C. From test-tube babies to second base all in one day,” she chuckled. She took in his very unimpressed look as he helped her into the t-shirt.

“I fail to understand why you mock the idea,” he said crisply. “It provides humanity with the best chance at obtaining a Sheldon two point oh.”

“Oh yay,” Penny said sarcastically as she stepped away fully dressed and went into the living room for her purse. “Stupid me for thinking test-tube sex with a stranger isn’t romantic.”

“What does romance have to do with procreation?” asked Sheldon as he followed. “And FYI Amy isn’t a stranger. She’s on probation. And I must say I have every confidence she’ll pass the final exam and become a full-fledged friend when the three months are up.”
Penny slipped on her flip-flops. “What the hell are you talking about, ‘exam’? I didn’t have to write one.”

“Yes, well, I admit I was inexperienced with the entire friendship paradigm when we met,” he said as they both exited the apartment and he locked up. “I now have an understanding of the tasks required in entering and maintaining a friendship. We’ll see how well you score when our Agreement’s up for review next year.”

“Oh, not this crap again about us not being friends,” snapped Penny as she went to press the elevator button.

“Of course we’re friends,” Sheldon said.

“Then why do you keep saying we’re not?”

“Penny I haven’t”—

“‘I’m not sure if I like you.’ ‘I don’t dislike you.’ ‘Let’s see if you can pass the friendship review.’”

“It’s in the Friendship Agreement,” he said simply. “It’s not my fault you haven’t read it.”

“You keep sending me updates on that stupid agreement.”

“Addendums.”

“Whatsoever. Sheldon, I’m a human being and whether you like it or—” Penny sucked in a breath as she had inadvertently moved her arm. “God.”

“Try not to move your shoulder,” he said.

“I’m trying.” She winced. “It hurts.”

“Let me get ready.” Sheldon entered his apartment and sprayed his slipper bottoms before grabbing his jacket and wallet and turning off the television. He slipped on his shoes and took the house keys from the bowl. As he stepped out and locked his door he heard Penny quietly sniffle. Sheldon pursed his lips. Penny might drive him crazy but he absolutely hated seeing her in distress.

They got into the elevator.

“Again I’d like to voice my apprehension about driving,” he began.

“Sheldon, I won’t blame you if we die in a fiery crash.”

“Who said anything about a fiery crash?” Sheldon said with an excited twang. He caught her look. “At any rate you couldn’t blame me. You’d be dead.”

They exited the elevator and building and made their way to Penny’s car. She put her purse on the hood and dug out her car keys. Sheldon then proceeded to unlock her door and waited until she got in before closing it. He then got into the driver’s seat.

“Okay, adjust the rear view mirror—done. Next the side—” he abruptly stopped and then got out of the vehicle.

“Where are you going?” asked Penny.
“I forgot to do a walk around the car,” he explained and headed to the trunk.

“KMN,” she sighed.

XxX

The elevator doors opened.

“Bridge Mr. Spock!” Penny said and giggled.

Sheldon rolled his eyes even as he gently guided her out of the elevator towards her door.

“Your drug-addled attempt at humor is deplorable,” he said. “Stand still, I have to open the door.” He dug out her keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. His hand went to the small of her back and they entered her apartment. He clicked on the light.

“Ak! Bright!” Penny protested. She heard him close the door behind them. “Where are you going?”

“To put you to bed.”

Again she giggled. “Put me to bed. You dog.”

“Yes, I’m a canine,” he said with a sigh as the two entered her bedroom.

“Bow-bow-bowooOoOo!”

“Penny! It’s three thirty in the morning!” he hissed over her laughter.

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not,” he said as he straightened the blankets on the bed.

Penny’s eyes looked him over as he worked.

“You know you’ve got a cute butt?” she said.

“I can’t say I did. And quit peeking,” he said as an afterthought.

“The hero always peeks, Dr. C.,” Penny said amusedly.

“And since when did you become my hero?” he asked as he fluffed the pillow.

“I didn’t say I was your hero. I said I was a hero. Besides, I can’t be your hero ‘cause you’re mine.”

“I stand corrected,” Sheldon said quietly. He moved her to the bed and she carefully got in. “I’ll leave your medication on your nightstand,” he said as he took the bottles out of his jacket pocket.

Penny snuggled into the pillow. “Sheldon?”

He turned to her. “Yes?”

She pumpkin grinned. “Sing Soft Kitty to me.”

“You’re not sick,” he replied as he tucked her in.
“Being stoned out of my mind is a kind of sick,” she countered.

He pursed his lips and made to protest but he found himself caught in her wide green eyes. There was mischief in them to be sure but there was also a genuine affection that warmed him.

Sheldon sat on the bed.

“Soft Kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur,” he sang. “Happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr purr purr.”

Penny closed her eyes and sighed. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Goodnight Penny.” He turned out the light and got up.

“Sheldon, do you think you’ll ever have sex?”

“I’ve never understood the inexplicable need for human contact,” he said seriously. “It baffles and repulses me.”

“Maybe you haven’t met the right person.” He snorted. “Sheldon, it’s magic.”

“I’m a scientist. I don’t believe in magic.”

“There’s magic all around you, Sheldon Cooper. Your fishies. Your physics string thingy.”

“String Theory.” He paused. “Since when did you make note of what I was doing?”

“I asked Leonard to teach me a little physics.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re all sciencey and Leonard’s sciencey and Ramona’s sciencey and Amy is sciencey.” She yawned. “And then there’s Penny.”

“You’re the antithesis of scientific inquiry, I agree.”

“I wanted to surprise you,” she mumbled.

“Cleaning your apartment would be surprise enough.” He regarded his friend. “Penny, I appreciate the sentiment but you don’t have to learn String Theory.”

“I jus’ want you to like me,” she said and nodded off.

Sheldon stared at her and then stepped forward and made sure the blanket was properly pulled up. He noted a strand of hair across her cheek and gently tucked it behind her ear. Given a hundred lifetimes he’d never understand Penny but in this instance he knew it was irrelevant to the status of their relationship.

He genuinely liked her.

The apartment door opened and he went into the living room to see Justin make his way in with his guitar and amp. The musician was absolutely shocked, perhaps a tad hopeful, as he saw Sheldon emerge from Penny’s bedroom and close her door.

“Penny’s asleep,” Sheldon said. “She had a fall and dislocated her shoulder.”

“Damn,” hissed Justin. “She okay?”
“We’ve just returned from the emergency room where they reset the shoulder and gave her a powerful pain killer. When you’re ready for bed open her bedroom door in case she needs you in the night. In the morning make sure she has breakfast so she can take her anti-inflammatory medication.”

“Sure thing.” Sheldon went to the apartment door and stopped.

“If you have any further questions Penny has my number.”

“Oh kay.”

“Goodnight.” Sheldon opened the door.

“Penny’s pretty cool.”

Sheldon turned to the musician. “Actually I’d say she’s far from aloof.”

Justin smiled. “I mean she’s awesome.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t you think so too?”

“I have a newfound appreciation for her stubbornness, if that counts.”

Justin frowned. “Look, Penny might come across as a Big Ol’ Five but we’re really tight so don’t mess with her if you aren’t interested.”

“In what?”

“Penny.”

Sheldon’s eyes narrowed. “Of course I’m concerned about her welfare. She’s my friend.”

“And that’s all?”

“That’s *everything*,” Sheldon said earnestly. “I’ll check in before work.”

Sheldon went back to his apartment and slipped off his shoes. It was beyond late and he missed his evening shower and had pooped at the hospital so he’d have to estimate his output. He checked his watch: if he went to sleep now he’d have four and a half hours before his morning shower. Perhaps he could delay until then?

He snorted and shook his head as he went to the kitchen cupboard for a garbage bag in order to deposit his clothes. After spending hours at the hospital there was no telling what contaminants he was coated in so his apparel was going into immediate quarantine until he could wash them.

Sheldon grabbed a towel from the closet and went into the washroom.

He nearly scrubbed himself raw in the shower.

xTBBTx

It was the dull ache in her shoulder that woke Penny. She turned her head to catch the clock. It was after eleven in the morning. No wonder she had to take a wicked pee. Carefully she got out of bed and padded her way to the washroom. As she went her eyes looked over her bathtub. The scene of the crime. Immediately the sensation of arms around her body came to mind. The smell of
baby powder. Blue eyes. He peeked.

“Son of a gun,” she chuckled before flushing the toilet and washing her hands.

When she came out Justin was in her doorway.

“Back to bed, missy,” he said. “I’ve come with breakfast.”

“Why thank you kind sir,” Penny chortled as she settled herself in the blankets.

He handed her a bowl of mixed tuna and a package of saltine crackers.

“We have to go shopping,” he said with a smile.

“You know coffee works just as well,” she replied as she eyed the tuna.

“Nope. Sheldon said you had to eat something so you could take your medicine.” Justin took the bottle off the nightstand. “See? ‘Take with food.’” She gave him a sour puss face. “He said you needed protein to go with the carb. Who am I to question a doctor?"

“He’s a physicist,” she said as she took a cracker from the package and scooped up some tuna. “He just thinks he knows everything.”

“I noticed his humbleness, yes.”

“Yeah but it kinda grows on you,” Penny chuckled.

“I’ll take your word for it.” Justin regarded his ex-girlfriend as she ate. He took a breath. “So anyways I asked about you two last night.”

Penny went ashen. “You did not!”

“Hey, you were sulking around the apartment; besides when he came out of your bedroom and said you were sleeping I was hoping for the best.”

“So what did he say?” she asked in a horrible attempt at sounding nonchalant.

“He likes you as a friend and that’s that.” Her face fell. “Hey, it’s his loss,” Justin said soothingly.

Penny let her head thump the wall. “Terrific. Now things are going to be so awkward.”

“I didn’t say you liked him,” Justin clarified. “I just asked if he was interested.”

Penny took a moment to think before slowly nodding her head.

“Well, at least I know where we stand,” she said softly.

xTBBTx

Scientificamerican: why do we swear?

Djspacebar: decibel levels
The Helium Debacle

Penny unlocked the door and entered her apartment.

“All mine,” she said with a happy sigh.

Justin had made friends with a couple of session musicians who were renting a house. They invited him to rent a room and he quickly accepted. As nice as it was paying no rent at Penny’s place his back was telling him it was time for a proper mattress.

As for Penny, she was glad Justin had been there to keep her from moping too much over Sheldon. Not that there was anything to mope about. He was still her friend and, more importantly, had no clue that she liked him. At least she thought she liked him. It was hard for her to pin her feelings for Sheldon. He was so unlike anyone she’d met that she felt protective of him and yet when Ramona and Amy came along she’d felt nothing less than threatened.

Besides, in the past week she’d gone through two bags of cookies, two pints of Ben and Jerry’s and a can of whipped cream. If that didn’t describe heartache the two pounds she’d gained sure did.

Penny sat on the couch and took in the silence.

She remembered the emergency stash of cookies in her room.

“Nope,” she said and proceeded across the hall to 4A. She knocked twice and opened the door to find Leonard on the phone. He gave her a little wave.

“Yes, I know…. Well technically I already fulfilled the pact. Stephanie invited her roommate…. Well it’s not my fault you…. Uh huh…. .” Leonard sighed. “Uh huh…. Look, no promises but I’ll see what I can do…. Look I’ve gotta go, Penny’s here…. No I’m not going to ask her…. I’m hanging up now.”

Penny plunked down on the couch. “Not gonna ask me what?”

“Howard’s on me again for getting together with Stephanie,” Leonard said with a roll of the eyes.

“Well, you did scoop her right out of a date, bub.”

“It wasn’t a date. They’d just met. And it wasn’t like she was going to sleep with him.”

“Digging yourself deeper.” Leonard sighed. “So what does this have to do with me?”

“Well Stephanie thought to set Howard up with her roommate but that…. Let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

“Howard Wolowitz on a date with a woman and it didn’t go well. Hard to believe,” Penny chuckled.
“Yeah. And now I’m supposed to come up with another woman for him.”

“Wow, it’s like sacrificing virgins to the volcano god.”

Leonard laughed. “Something like that. So, know any virgins?”

“You mean girls I no longer want to be friends with?”

“Howard’s not that bad of a guy.”

“Yeah I know,” said Penny. “It’s too bad he can’t get it through his head that he tries too hard. I mean how long have I known him and yet I can’t say I’ve ever really ‘met’ him—unless the cheesy comments are all that he is.”

“No, there’s more. It’d take someone to beat it out of him.”

“Well, I don’t know if she’d beat him up but my coworker Bernie’s a real sweetheart. She’s in grad school working on microbiology.” Here Penny laughed. “See, she’s practically an expert on Howard!”

“So could you set them up?” Leonard asked hopefully.

“I dunno,” she teased. “What do I get out of it?”

“Well, I could let you in on a secret that someone likes you.”

“I’m not going out with Raj,” she said flat out.

“Nope. He lives a lot closer to you.”

“It better not be Sheldon.”

Leonard’s face fell. “Why not?”

“Leonard, we’re just friends.”

“Are you sure? I mean—”

“Justin asked. Sheldon said he just wants to be friends.”

“Ah,” Leonard said, feeling awkward. “So weird because I could have sworn he liked you.”

“Well don’t feel so bad. Your mother was also convinced he had the hots for me” said Penny with a crooked smile.

“She won’t like to hear she’s wrong,” Leonard chuckled.

“Leonard, I think someone would need a doctorate in Sheldoneanese in order to understand him.”

“You seem to be doing an admirable job on the fly.”

“It’s called cutting the crap. Speaking of Sheldon where is he?”

“At a card tournament at the comic store with Raj.”

Penny grinned. “That’s cool. I was hoping to drag him over so I could pick out a Christmas gift for the nephew. By the way he loved his Spider-Man comic, thank you very much.”
“You’re welcome.” Leonard checked his watch. “The tournament should be done soon so if you want to catch him…..”

“On my way.” She got off the couch. “I’ll see Bernie at work tomorrow so I’ll text you when I know if it’s a go.”

“Great. Thanks Penny.”

She crossed back to her apartment and grabbed her purse and keys and made her way to her car. As she drove off she felt a twinge of butterflies. This would be the first time she’d see Stuart after the disaster of a date. Then to make things even worse Sheldon would be there.

“Maybe I should have taken Leonard,” she murmured.

XxX

Penny slipped her purse onto her shoulder and entered the comic book shop. For once no one turned to see her as all eyes were on something in the center of the room. She ventured over to see Sheldon and Raj sitting at a table across from Stuart and another guy with a light moustache and beard wearing a geeky t-shirt. Only Sheldon and the stranger had cards in their hands. She slid by Captain Sweatpants in order to stand behind Sheldon.

“Sulphur,” said Wil Wheaton as he set the card on the table.

“Brimstone,” Sheldon said with a smarmy smirk. Wil frowned as he mulled over his cards.

“You’re holding two moderate spell cards, a small rock and a potion of Zancor. Your only move is to play the potion, lose the skirmish and two moves later, the game.”

“Son of a gun,” Wil said, amazed and somewhat amused.

“The year was nineteen ninety five,” began Sheldon. “The place, Jackson, Mississippi. Having spent ten hours on a bus, during which I had to twice violate my personal rule against relieving myself on board a moving vehicle, I finally arrived at the fourth annual Dixie-Trek convention only to find that my idol Wil Wheaton decided he had better things to do than to show up and sign my action figure.”

Wil set his cards down and looked hurt.

“Dude, my grandmother just died and I had to go to her funeral.”

Sheldon’s jaw dropped, his cocky attitude out the window. “Your Meemaw died? That’s terrible.”

“Yeah it was,” Wil sighed. “But I’m really sorry that I disappointed you.”

Penny narrowed her eyes.

“No, I understand,” Sheldon stammered. “Anything happened to my Meemaw, I’d be one inconsolable Moonpie.”

Wil’s eyes sparkled. “It’s a special relationship, isn’t it, between a boy and his grandmother?”

“Oh yes.”

“He’s lying,” Penny said evenly, breaking the spell of the room.

“Who would lie about their Meemaw dying?” gasped Wil.
“Apparently you would. Nice use of method acting by the way.”

Wil’s face turned red. “Who the hell are you coming in here and saying I’m lying about my Meemaw?”

“Look, I know all about death and you’re full of it!” snapped Penny. “When my baby died it was like a part of me went with her.” Tears ran down her cheeks. “You’re such an ass for doing this.”

Wil smirked. “Good job.”

Penny smiled back as she wiped her eyes. “Thank ya.”

Sheldon looked from Wil to Penny. “What’s going on here?”

“Sheldon, this guy’s lying.”

“But his Meemaw….”

Penny snorted. “I bet you ten bucks his Meemaw’s alive and well.” Sheldon was silent as he mulled things over. She bent over so their heads were even. “Sheldon, if you cave to this guy I’m going to your room and taking out a comic book and putting a little happy face in it and putting it back so you’ll never know which one it is.”

He scowled. “That isn’t very nice.”

“Threats aren’t supposed to be nice,” she said sweetly.

“Ah.” He frowned. “Well when you put it that way.” He looked to Wil. “Play the potion card.”

Wil cocked his head as he looked at Penny. He grinned. “Well played.” He tossed the rest of his cards on the table and Raj leapt into the air with his arms raised. “Good game, Sheldon.” Will got up and left the table.

“I’ll get you the winnings,” Stuart said and both he and Raj went to the counter.

Sheldon was quiet as he sat alone at the table.

“You won, honey,” Penny said lightly.

“So he was lying?” Sheldon said at last.

“Yup.”

“His Meemaw’s alright?”

“Yup, yup.”

He looked up at his friend. “How do you know?”

“Sheldon, I’m an actress. I’ve studied method acting for two and a half years. Believe me I can spot it a mile away.”

“I see.” Sheldon got up from the table.

“Listen I need help picking something out for my nephew,” said Penny.

“Alright.” They head over to the graphic novel section. “Query, when were you pregnant?”
Penny rolled her eyes.

xTBBTx

Penny stumbled bleary-eyed over to 4A with coffee cup in hand.

Leonard noted the zombie look to his neighbor and said nothing as he got the coffee and poured it into her cup. He took out Sheldon’s milk from the refrigerator and Penny poured some into her cup before taking a sip. It took one more sip for the transformation into living Penny came to fruition.

“Good morning, Leonard,” she croaked and took another sip.

“Good morning to you, ‘she who has risen’,” he chuckled. Penny grunted. “So what was the occasion?”

“Gwen’s birthday. Came home at three and here I am all peachy keen for the early shift at the restaurant.” She took another sip of coffee. “Man, I’m too old for this.”

“Twenty one isn’t old by any means,” tsked Sheldon as he came down the hall. “You’re in your prime, unlike my milk if you continue to leave it on the counter.”

“Yes boss,” said Penny and then she stopped as she took in her neighbor’s dark grey slacks, light gray shirt, a purple-plaid suit jacket and a striped tie. “What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, not much,” Sheldon said, although it was obvious he was bubbling with excitement. “I’m going to be interviewed by Ira Flatow on National Public Radio’s Science Friday.”

“Wow, Ira Flatow. That’s great,” Penny said overenthusiastically.

“I’m in such a good mood I’ll even let slide the fact you don’t know who Ira Flatow is,” Sheldon said with a smirk.

“So what time do you have to be at the studio?”

“I’m not going to the studio. I’ll be interviewed over the phone from my office.”

Penny blinked. “O-kay. Then why get all dolled up?”

“Penny, it’s national radio. I can’t be interviewed wearing what-have-you. Besides,” Sheldon said as he adjusted the knot in his tie. “My mother and her church group will be listening.”

“Aw, that’s nice,” grinned Penny.

“They’ll be praying for my soul,” sighed the lanky physicist.

“You know she means well,” Leonard said.

“I suppose,” replied Sheldon. “Only her meaning well would be so much better if she could get me yellow cake uranium instead of brochures to a Christian boat cruise complete with ‘Gunning with God’.” Again he adjusted his tie. “Nope, need a mirror.” He went to the washroom.

“So when’s Sheldon on?” asked Penny.

“Sheldon said at two twenty. Why, got a hunkering for magnetic monopoles?”

Penny shrugged. “I dunno. Bernie’s into science so maybe she’d be interested. Oh, speaking of
which, it’s a go with Howard.”

“You’re kidding?” Leonard said, pleased. “So how much did it cost you?”

“I just said that he was a short engineer with a sense of humor and other quirky traits,” replied Penny. “All Bernie said was that it’d be a treat not having to look up his nose while talking to him.”

“Sounds like a match to me,” Leonard laughed. “Although the rest of it sounds like a candy coating on the creepy.”

“Yeah, well, don’t say I didn’t take a bullet for the team,” Penny said before taking a sip of coffee.

XxX

Penny saved her break until two fifteen and made her way to Bernadette’s car where the short woman sat waiting.

“Wow, I can’t believe Sheldon’s on Science Friday,” gushed Bernadette.

“That big of a deal?” asked Penny as she peeled the wrapper of a granola bar and began eating.

“It’s like you being interviewed by Oprah. Well, without getting the free car.”

Music came from the radio before the host returned. “This is Ira Flatow and you’re listening to NPR’s Science Friday. Joining us today by phone from his office in Pasadena, California is Dr. Sheldon Cooper. Thanks for being with us today, Dr. Cooper.”

“My pleasure, Ira.”

Penny smiled at the sound of her friend’s voice.

“Now, let’s talk about magnetic monopoles,” said Ira. “Can you explain to our audience just what a monopole is?”

“Of course. First, consider an ordinary magnet which has”—the pitch of his voice began to rise—“as even the most uneducated in your audience must know, two poles”—his pitch rose further—“a north and south pole.” Both Penny and Bernadette looked at each other in confusion. “If you cut that in half, you have two smaller magnets, each with its own north and south pole.”

“Uh, Dr. Cooper, I think there might be something wrong with our connection,” Ira said diplomatically.

Penny winced at the high-pitched squeak of Sheldon’s voice even as the physicist did his best to clear his throat with a slight cough.

“No, I hear you fine,” said Sheldon. “As I was saying, an ordinary magnet has two poles. The primary characteristic of a monopole is that it has only one pole, hence, monopole.” His voice sounded as if he was away from the speaker. “A requirement for string theory, or M-theory, if you will, is the existence of such monopoles. Kripke, I found the nozzle! I’m going to kill you!”

“Yes, well, I think we’ll get in touch with Dr. Cooper at a later time,” Ira said. “We’ll be right back.”

The two women sat silently in the car.

“What the hell was that?” Penny said at last.
“Your friend said nozzle. The only thing I can think of is that he was gassed with helium,” said Bernadette. “It makes your voice go higher.” She pursed her lips. “That wasn’t very nice.”

Penny turned off the radio. “Son of a bitch….”

XxX

After her shower and change into her comfy clothes Penny crossed the hall and knocked twice at 4A before opening the door.

“Hey,” said Leonard as he was preparing dinner on the counter.

“That was one weird science talk,” Penny said as she sprayed her feet before crossing over to the kitchen.

“Yeah,” he replied with a bit of a chuckle. “I told Sheldon he should get Kripke back but he’s not up to the idea at the moment.”

“Is he in his room?”

“I’m hoping the smell of dinner will lure him out.”

Penny nodded and proceeded to Sheldon’s room. She knocked twice on the door before opening it to find him curled on his bed in his formal attire sans jacket.

“What do you want?” he sniffled.

“Just checking in on you, sweetie,” she replied. “Booboos and Ouchies, remember?”

“How about total humiliation?”

Penny came in and sat on the bed. She expected to be chastised but that he didn’t say a word about her intrusion meant he was really hurting.

“It wasn’t that bad,” she said soothingly. Sheldon snorted.

“‘Being nice about it doesn’t mean bullshitting me.’”

“Language, Sheldon,” she said softly. “But you’re right, my bad.”

Silence. And then Sheldon’s phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He took it out and glanced at it.

“Amy,” he said listlessly. “No doubt she heard my Munchkin impression.”

“Ah. I’ll let you two talk,” Penny said, trying hard not to feel hurt that even this had been transferred to—

“Please don’t go.”

“I’ll be here as long as you need me, sweetie.” She heard him sniffle even as he put his phone down on the bed. “Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur,” she sang. “Happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr purr purr.”

Her heart broke as instead of soothing her friend she could tell he was crying.

“Sheldon,” she said soothingly and put a hand on his arm. Immediately she could feel his body
stiffen. “Sorry,” she said and removed her hand. “Just want you to know that you’re not alone.”

“I wish I was,” he quietly sobbed. “This is just like second grade when I was pantsed in front of the entire school; only this time I’ve been humiliated on a national radio program.” Again he sniffled. “All my life I’ve faced ridicule. The only time I’ve ever felt at peace is when I’m theorizing. Physics has made everything worthwhile.” More sniffing and tears. “And now who’ll take my work seriously?” His body curled tighter, crinkling a piece of paper on the bed.

Penny didn’t know what to say and so she remained silent and let Sheldon cry.

Eventually his breathing, though his nose was stuffed, evened out and she knew he was asleep. She got up and moved to the other side of the bed. Sheldon’s eyes were puffy and his cheeks flushed. With pursed lips Penny picked up his phone and placed it on his nightstand. She then spotted the paper and slid it out from under Sheldon’s knee.

It was a letter. Written in a neat hand.

Dear Moonpie, it began.

xTBBTx

Penny knocked twice before entering 4A carrying her coffee cup. She saw Sheldon at the sink running water and Leonard in his chair eating cereal. She smiled at Leonard as she walked to the kitchen.

“Morning Sheldon,” she said.

“Good morning, Penny,” he replied in a flat voice as he turned off the water and placed his bowl, spoon and glass in the drain tray.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” she said, trying her best to remain positive even though she positively hated seeing Sheldon like this. Granted he was an arrogant ass at times but that was him. Homo Novus or whatever it was he called himself. This man before her with his eyes somewhere about her knees as he turned towards her was not Dr. C.

And that pissed her off.

“It’s Saturday. It’s laundry night,” he replied.

“Yeah but that’s tonight. You’ve got the whole day before you.”

“Well this morning Leonard and I are cleaning the apartment. After lunch I’ll sort laundry and do some paperwork while my clothing presoaks.”

“Ah.” An idea came to Penny. “How ‘bout we go play some mini-putt?”

“It’s not Anything Can Happen Thursday,” he reminded her.

“Call it a special circumstance.”

“What’s special about today?” Sheldon asked with a twitchy mouth. “It’s merely the day after yesterday.”

“Yeah but yesterday was kinda rough.”

A muscle popped in his jaw. “As Leonard pointed out to me this morning Kripke’s actions were nothing more than a prank.” Another twitch passed over his lips even as they pursed. “I failed to
“Because it wasn’t funny!” snapped Penny. “Sheldon, he was a complete ass wipe for doing that.” She shook her head. “Where’s the administration on this? You’ve gotta file a complaint.”

“No one likes a tattler. This will pass and then people will get back to science and my work will escape untarnished,” Sheldon explained.

“But what about you?”

“My work is what’s important.”

“This is crap! Sheldon, you were really hurt and—”

“Penny, I have to evacuate my bowels,” he said evenly.

“Well I’m not finished. You count for something, Sheldon. Your feelings matter, too. This Kripke guy shit right where you eat and there’s no way he can get aw—”

“Penny, enough,” Sheldon said quietly as his eyes met hers. Penny inwardly growled at the loss of something in his blue stare.

She clamped her mouth and stood aside so the lanky physicist could slip past her and venture to the washroom. As soon as the door closed she turned to Leonard.

“You said this was a prank?” she seethed.

“Kripke and Sheldon have a complicated relationship,” Leonard said nervously.

“Enlighten me.”

“Well, Sheldon’s always lording over others and Kripke doesn’t like it so he tries to knock Sheldon down a peg every chance he gets.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “But that’s so juvenile!”

Leonard shrugged. “Well, university or not we’re still in school.”

Penny frowned. “You’d think with how many times bullies have taken your lunch money you’d treat each other better.”

“We might have split the atom but scientists are human, too.”

“So’s Sheldon,” Penny said firmly.

“I told him I’d help him get Kripke back but he’s not interested,” said Leonard.

“At least someone’s being mature.”

Leonard placed his cereal bowl on the coffee table.

“I don’t think it’s maturity per se. When I explained pranks to Sheldon his first instinct was to poison Kripke.”

“And that wasn’t a clue that Sheldon is hurting?” she asked incredulously.

“I suppose,” Leonard said after a moment to think. “It’s just that when I said to pick something
nonlethal he went to a whoopee cushion.” He shrugged again. “For a complicated guy Sheldon’s kind of simplistic.”

Penny went to the counter and poured herself some coffee.

“Thanks,” she said and made her way to the door and her flip-flops. “And by the way, Leonard, you hit the nail on the head with Sheldon. He doesn’t get it which is why he gets it from others. That’s why his friends have to look out for him.”

She closed the door.

Leonard sat back in his chair with a pensive look on his face.

xTBBTx

Penny tried first one corridor then another before giving up for lost. Another turn around the corner and her eyes brightened with hope. Her heeled shoes clicked down the hall until she found the physics office.

“Hi,” said Shirley with a wide grin from behind her desk.

“Hey,” Penny smiled back. “Listen, I’m trying to find Dr. Leonard Hofstadter’s office.”

“I can look that up for you but chances are he’s in the experimental physics wing.” Shirley clicked a few keys on her computer. “Yes, he has the lab booked this morning.”

“I hope it’s okay to bother him,” Penny said. “I’m his neighbor and I’m going away for a few days unexpectedly and I need to give him my keys and some instructions.”

“I’m sure it’ll be okay,” said Shirley. “Take this hall all the way to the other end where you’ll find the stairs. Go to the basement and look for Lab ‘E’. Be sure to knock and wait for him to open the door because he’s working with lasers.”

“Sure thing. Thanks.” Penny turned and bumped into a wide-eyed older gentleman who took in every ounce of her short skirt, long legs and low cut nature to her peach-colored top. She gave him a devastating smile and slipped by.

She followed Shirley’s directions and found herself at the lab door.

“Leonard?” She knocked. “It’s Penny.”

“Just a minute,” he called. A few moments later the door opened and he lifted the red pair of glasses onto the top of his head. “Hey, come on in.”

“Thanks.” She walked in and looked at a variety of complex equipment on the table before turning to Leonard even as he closed the door. “So this is where you work?”

“This is it,” he agreed.

“So what are you working on?”

“Ultrafast lenseless imaging with OPA-driven high-harmonic generation.”

Penny smirked. “And in English that means….”

“Many processes in nature such as ultrafast chemical reactions, material dynamics, and electronic transitions, occur on femtosecond and attosecond timescales,” explained Leonard. “In order to
measure and understand such fast dynamics it is necessary to have a source which can provide
temporal resolution on these timescales. One such source is high harmonic generation.”

“Didn’t understand a word of it but it sounds impressive,” Penny said. She cocked her head. “Not
bad for, you know, an experimental physicist.” They both chuckled.

“I get by,” Leonard said. “So what’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Where does Kripke work?”

Leonard smirked. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not,” Penny said with a slight smile.

“I’ll take you.” Leonard put his red safety glasses on the table and grabbed the lab keys. They
walked the hall to the central elevator. “So, still mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you,” Penny said, noting the look of relief on Leonard’s face. “The whole
situation’s sucky and more has to be done than just pranking each other. If national humiliation is
just a ‘joke’ who knows what else would be funny to Kripke. I’d rather not find out.”

“I wasn’t going to let him get away with it,” Leonard amended as they got into the elevator and he
pressed the floor button. “I just wasn’t going to do what you’re going to do now. Which, if I’m
guessing correctly, I again don’t want to know.”

“Nope,” she said, popping the P. The elevator doors opened. “Scene of the crime, Leonard.”

“Gotcha. This hall,” he pointed. “Take it to the end, through the double doors and swing to the
right and his office is there.”

“Thanks.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek and stepped out of the elevator before the doors
closed. Penny clicked her way to Kripke’s office. Fortunately the door was open and Kripke was
typing at his desk.

“Excuse me,” Penny said with an innocent smile. “Are you Barry Kripke? Sheldon Cooper’s
friend?”

Immediately Kripke got up.

“Fow you I’ll be Coopah’s bwood bwother,” he oozed before coming to stand in front of his desk
just as Penny entered and closed the door. “Say, youw the giwl fwom the physics bowl. What did
you say youw name was? Woxanne?”

“You remember me,” Penny said sweetly as she moved to stand in front of Kripke.

“Babe, it’s hawd to fowget you,” he admitted as his eyes drifted across her chest.

Her eyes narrowed. “Or this.” She gave him a swift knee to the groin, dropping the physicist to
the ground. “You listen to me,” she hissed. “Sheldon can be a jerk and you can call him on that
but you won’t pull any more crap like you did last Friday.”

“Youw cwazy,” Kripke moaned.
“I haven’t gotten to the crazy part yet,” Penny continued. She bent down so the physicist got a good eyeful of her breasts and green eyes. “I know people in the drug trade who owe me favors, kapish?”

Kripke looked at Penny. “So I take it dinnew’s off?”

“Completely.” The waitress stood and did her best to exude every ounce of ‘sexy bitch’ she had in her body. “Although you shouldn’t complain, a girl actually touched your man parts.”

Penny left the office and closed the door behind her. As she walked towards the elevator a wide grin cracked her face.

“Drug trade,” she snorted and chuckled.

Her brother the meth cook and her mom the part-time pot smoker.

Not exactly the kingpins of crime but they did the trick.

XxX

Penny finished her chicken pot pie and put the tin and fork in the sink. Granted she shouldn’t have eaten so late but work was crazy so she didn’t get a chance to have dinner. Besides the crowd she was nervous about the morning. Suppose Kripke called the police? By the end of the shift and no sign of the boys in blue Penny relaxed.

“That’s step one,” she said as she crossed over to her bookshelf and took up a flat box. "Now for Operation: Cheer Dr. C." It wasn’t quite Christmas yet but she gave a what-the-hell shrug.

As she crossed the hall Leonard opened the door to his apartment carrying a bag of garbage.

“Hey,” he said brightly. “So, I saw Kripke at lunch and he seemed to have all his fingers and toes.”

“Oh he’s got everything, just some of it’s been rearranged,” chuckled Penny.

“My mother is looking forward to meeting you.” Amy’s voice from the living room.

Penny’s heart began to race even as her mood took a leap off a bridge.

“It did the trick though,” said Leonard. “Kripke walked—”

“Of course she would,” said Sheldon to Amy. “I’m a catch.”

“—didn’t say a thing to Sheldon,” continued Leonard. He noted the strange look on Penny’s face. “Are you okay?”

Penny blinked and then put up a smile. “Yeah, I ate late and now I’m regretting it.”

“I’m sure Sheldon has some antacids you could use.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got some Rolaids. But thanks.” She went back to her apartment door.

Leonard was puzzled. “Weren’t you coming over?”

“I didn’t know Sheldon had company. I’ll come over some other time,” Penny said.

Leonard closed his door. “Yeah, I don’t blame you. They came up with this weird ass game and
have been playing it all evening. I tried one question and have been spending the rest of my evening in my bedroom.”

“Huh. Good plan. ‘Night.” Penny entered her apartment and closed the door. With a sigh she tossed the box on the coffee table as she went to her room to lie down. As it hit the table its cover jarred loose revealing a napkin.

Sheldon did have a deal after all.

It just wasn’t Penny.

tBBtx

Penny wheeled her suitcase into the living room. Her Christmas holiday couldn’t have come soon enough. She set her purse on her suitcase and sucked in a big breath before crossing over to 4A.

Rapping out ‘shave and a haircut’ without the last two knocks she entered to find Sheldon and Amy sitting together on the couch with cue cards in hand.

“—and that’s why ice cream is Tibet’s main export,” said Sheldon.

“Correct,” confirmed Amy and flipped a card behind the stack.

“Hey,” said Penny. “Leonard around?”

With a frown Sheldon knocked twice on the table.

“He’s out,” he replied.

“Damn.”

“Is there something wrong, Penny?” asked Amy.

“It’s just that I was going to the airport and was hoping he could give me a lift.”

Amy brightened. “I’ll take you.”

Penny bit her lip. “I don’t want to bother you. I mean you’re busy.”

“While Counterfactuals is an amusing way to pass the time I couldn’t imagine anything more magical than chittering away with you about girl things all the way to the airport,” the neurobiologist gushed.

The waitress took in Amy’s eager face.

“Okay, sure,” Penny replied with a little smile. It wasn’t Amy’s fault that Sheldon liked her.

“Amy, a moment,” said Sheldon. “We haven’t finished the round.”

“Ah yes, I forgot your need for closure,” she replied. “It’ll only take a moment, Penny.”

Sheldon drew a card and cleared his throat. “In a world where trees can walk how does Superman shave?”

Amy cocked her head. “Simple, as comic books aren’t published due to the hardship involving trapping trees for pulp we needn’t worry about Superman shaving or doing anything else for that matter as he wouldn’t exist.”
Sheldon frowned. “Incorrect.”

Amy raised an eyebrow in surprise. “How is my logic flawed?”

Sheldon put his cards on the table. “It’s easy enough to answer. Why I bet even Penny could get it.”

“Yeah, but that’d mean Penny actually cared,” grunted Penny. “And thanks for the compliment, coach.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “Although perhaps I was embellishing your capabilities.”

Penny pursed her lips and was about to rip him a new one when an answer came that was so stupid she just had to say it.

“Okay, since there’s no paper there’s no toilet paper so Supes doesn’t have anything to stick to his face after cutting with a Krypton razor so that’s out. Therefore he burns it off with his laser eye beams.”

“Correct,” Sheldon said, stunned.

She turned to Amy. “I’ll just grab my suitcase and lock up.” Penny smiled at Sheldon. “Don’t mess with the mastah. Merry Christmas, Sheldon.”

“I thought you didn’t celebrate Saturnalia?” Amy said to the physicist.

“Yeah but I do so that trumps that,” sniffed Penny. “I suppose you don’t celebrate Christmas either?”

“I believe it functions well as a method of familial bonding,” replied Amy. “Unfortunately my addiction study keeps me in town over the holidays.” Here she smiled. “Although Sheldon and I are getting together Christmas evening for dinner and a documentary on the introduction of the Hawaiian cane toad to Australia and its disastrous results.”

“Oh,” said Penny. She put on a brave face. “That’s nice.”

“You seem disappointed,” said Amy. “We could record the documentary for you if you’d like.”

“That’s okay,” Penny said quickly as she turned to go.

Amy got up and grabbed her purse. “In that case I’ll relate the central premise since I’m not spoiling it for you.”

“Really, Amy, you don’t have to,” Penny called over her shoulder from the hall.

“It’s not a bother at all.” Amy slipped on her loafers. “I’ll text you later,” she said to Sheldon before exiting and closing the door behind her.

xTBBTx

After stretching and his vocal test, Sheldon slipped on his housecoat and slippers and made his way to the washroom. He then ventured to the living room to find Leonard on the couch drinking coffee and Penny’s mini Christmas tree on the coffee table.

“Merry Christmas,” the shorter physicist said with a smile, knowing it’d drive his roommate nuts.
“Good morning, Leonard,” replied Sheldon. “And bah humbug for the record.”

“Don’t be like that or you won’t get your presents,” Leonard teased.

Immediately Sheldon was stricken.

“But I don’t want any presents,” he complained. “I don’t need the obligation.”

“It’s not an obligation, Sheldon. People give gifts because they want to not because they expect anything back. Now the envelope’s for you.”

“Fine,” snorted Sheldon. “But I’m taking these presents under formal protest.”

“The record shall so reflect,” chuckled Leonard.

Sheldon opened the envelope and pulled out the Christmas card with a Santa Claus on it laughing out a ‘Ho, ho, ho’. He rolled his eyes before reading the card. It was from Leonard and promised a trip to Disney World in the Spring.

“This isn’t in the Roommate Agreement,” Sheldon said at last.

“Sheldon, we’re friends. It’s what friends do.”

“Oh. I see. Your onus on me to reciprocate has been noted,” said Sheldon.

Leonard cracked a grin even as he chuckled. “You’re welcome.”

“Huh,” mused Sheldon. “Twenty five years without a friend and then three plop right in my lap.”

“And speaking of friends.” Leonard indicated the box on the table.

Sheldon sighed. “More obligations. How thoughtful.” He picked it up and lifted the top to see a signed napkin. As he read color drained from his face as his jaw dropped.

“What?” asked Leonard innocently.

“‘To Sheldon, Live Long And Prosper. Leonard Nimoy’!” gasped Sheldon. His finger lightly traced the actor’s signature before he took up the napkin proper. Written on the cardboard beneath in Penny’s loopy writing was ‘Merry Saturnalia Dr. C!’

Leonard stared at his friend with warm eyes. “Awesome, huh? Penny said she met him at the restaurant and, oh, to forgive her for the smudge on the napkin. She didn’t have a clean one handy so he used one he’d wiped his mouth with and—”

Sheldon was staggered. “You mean that I possess the DNA of Leonard Nimoy?!”

“Yeah, I told Penny not to worry about it.” Leonard noted Sheldon’s hand began to shake as it held the boxed napkin. “You okay?” His roommate’s eyes, wet with tears, came to his face.

“How am I supposed to thank her for this?” Sheldon said hoarsely. “There’s nothing I could possibly give her that’d even compare.”

“Ask her out,” Leonard said simply.

“Out where?”

Leonard blinked. “Sheldon, she likes you.”
“Of course she does. We’re friends.” The lanky physicist put the lid back on the napkin and wiped his eyes.

“I mean more than that. I mean romantically.”

Now it was Sheldon’s turn to blink. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Leonard said incredulously. “Penny likes you and all you can say is ‘oh’?”

“I thought she was my friend.”

“She is your friend.”

Sheldon frowned. “Then why does she wish to copulate with me?”

“Did she say she wanted to copulate with you?”

“No. This must violate the Friendship Agreement.”

“Believe me, Sheldon, it enhances it. I can’t even begin to tell you how much better you are than when I first met you. Penny really did wonders.”

Sheldon thought for a moment.

“I don’t know if I like this development,” he said. “I barely comprehend our existing dynamic.”

Leonard got up to put his coffee cup on the counter.

“You like it alright.” He went to just in front of the washroom before turning around. “You’re lucky, y’know.”

“How could I possibly be fortunate with this turn of events?” Sheldon asked incredulously.

“Because you met a kind and warm and beautiful woman who gets you a Leonard Nimoy napkin and hangs out with you even though you’re, well, you.” Sheldon made to speak. “And whatever you think you feel let me tell you it’s been obvious to Raj, Howard and me that you like Penny, too.”

“We’re friends, Leonard,” Sheldon said firmly.

“Going down swinging, huh?” snorted Leonard amusedly. “Swimming in de-nial, denial, denial,” he sang as he entered the washroom.

Sheldon glared at the door before his eyes dropped to the box in his hands. He removed the lid and after another long look at the napkin he picked it up to again read Penny’s Christmas greeting.

XxX

Amy knocked at 4A and waited until Leonard answered the door.

“Hey Amy,” he said as he adjusted his tie. “Sheldon’s in his room.” He turned to the hallway. “Sheldon! Amy’s here!”

“Thank you, Leonard.” Amy slipped off her shoes and sprayed her feet before stepping into the room proper. “By your attire I’m assuming you’re going out.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a date with Stephanie. She’s on-call until seven so she couldn’t have dinner with
the folks so we’re going out to a restaurant for Christmas dinner.”

“Yes, Leonard’s about to engage in the dance so he can later do the rumba with no pants as Wolowitz would say,” tsked Sheldon as he came down the hall into the living room.

“Don’t mind him,” Leonard smirked as he took up his suit jacket from the back of his computer chair. “His hyper-stimulated amygdala’s making him snarky this evening.”

Amy looked at Sheldon curiously as the latter sat in his spot in a big-ass pout.

“No it’s not,” Sheldon said brusquely. “So there!” He stuck out his tongue. “Nyah!”

“You do seem agitated,” said Amy as she sat at the other end of the couch to better observe her friend.

“Oh, he’s agitated alright,” giggled Leonard. “Penny’s got his mojo hopping.”

“She does not,” huffed Sheldon. “As I recall you’re the one who sought romantic relations with her.”

“And as I recall someone in this room didn’t like that.”

“I didn’t say anything to that regard,” frowned Sheldon. “You’re making unsupported assertions.”

“Unsupported? Alright. How about when you told me that you wouldn’t put up with me pursuing Penny?”

“I meant if she refused your paradigm shift, which she did.”

“And telling Howard to back off Penny?”

“Penny obviously doesn’t like Howard. She tolerates him for our benefit. As Penny’s friend I shouldn’t be responsible for putting her into undesired situations.”

“And when you freaked at her going on a date with her ex?”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “You’ve met Kurt. He’s a bully who’s built like a brick crap house as Meemaw says.”

Leonard put his hands in the air. “All I’m saying is that it’s interesting you only freak out when other men are interested in Penny.” He took his keys from the bowl.

“I’m her friend. It’s my duty to ensure her safety.”

“De-nial, denial, denial,” sang Leonard as he went out and closed the door behind him.

Amy took in Sheldon’s sour expression. “You’re upset. Discuss.”

“Leonard’s changed the whole dynamic of Penny’s and my relationship. Until this morning she and I were simply friends and now he’s suggesting she ‘likes me’”—here he used air quotes with his fingers—“in an amorous fashion.”

“And you’re angry because you don’t reciprocate these feelings,” Amy sought to clarify.

“I suppose so.” He paused as he thought things over. “I mean I assume I am.” He regarded his friend. “It feels different.” Here he sighed disgustedly. “Good Lord that woman’ll be the death of me.”
“My curiosity’s piqued.” Amy got off the couch and dragged Sheldon’s whiteboard to the center of the room. “Let’s map out your symptoms.” She popped the lid off a marker. “You now know that Penny likes you and you experience….”

“My abdominal muscles contract. There’s a reduction of blood flow to my stomach causing a butterflies-like sensation. I feel a heightened awareness of Penny as, for instance, I’ve spent the afternoon recalling moments I’ve spent with her.” He narrowed his brow in confusion. “And yet there’s anxiety and apprehension.”

“Why?”

“This is all supposition. Leonard’s the one who has proposed this hypothesis, not Penny, and most certainly not me. Given his flawed methodology demonstrated time and again on his whiteboard it’s highly unlikely he’s right about this.”

Amy finished writing and drew a line to start another column.

“Alright, we’ll take another approach. Suppose you’re right and Leonard has this all wrong. How does that make you feel?”

“Vindicated. As I’ve told myself repeatedly this afternoon Penny and I are friends.”

“And you feel satisfied with that paradigm?”

“Of course.”

“And if Penny then decides to court another mate?” asked Amy.

“It’s her right. I mean I don’t own Penny.” Sheldon shrugged. “Although as her friend I’m surely allotted some sort of say in whom she dates.”

“Or marries.”

Silence.

Amy capped her marker. “Sheldon, looking over this board there are few choices: you have a tumor pressing on your hypothalamus, a second personality is emerging or you are experiencing a romantic attachment to Penny.”

“You forgot one. Given my stomach complaint I could be hosting an alien parasite.”

Amy cocked her head. “Sheldon, looking over this board there are few choices: you have a tumor pressing on your hypothalamus, a second personality is emerging or you are experiencing a romantic attachment to Penny.”

“Or marries.”

“Where would you have picked one up?”

“Well I did eat a Taco Bell burrito I later learned Leonard had purchased the previous day,” suggested Sheldon.

“I somehow doubt Taco Bell is a front for a hostile extraterrestrial takeover of Earth but if it puts you at ease we can have your stomach x-rayed,” Amy said matter-of-factly. “As for the other possibilities, given the frequency in which you have your brain scanned for Leonard’s mother I doubt the tumor. You are at times a left-handed monkey wrench but in all other respects mentally sound. Therefore the only remaining possibility is most likely. You like Penny.”

“Then we need to devise an experiment to see if she has a romantic interest in you in such a way that will not compromise your friendship should she not.”

“This is poppycock.” A further pause. “Although I’m curious as to what experiment you have in mind?”

“Traditionally a date is the protocol,” said Amy.

Sheldon nodded. “Like to a prize fight?”

“I was thinking something less draconian. How about dinner?”

“We already have dinner at my apartment,” replied Sheldon.

“Take her out to a restaurant. Nothing too formal but above fast-food,” Amy offered.

“I suppose I could research a satisfactory eating establishment,” mused Sheldon. “It’s no big deal. We already conduct communal meals. Yes, I could see that.” He pursed his lips. “There’s only one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’re wrong and it does turn out I have an alien parasite the date could end with it bursting forth from my body, spraying her with my bodily fluids before ultimately eating her. What woman would like that?”

Amy paused as she thought of Penny covered in Sheldon’s fluids.

“It’s a risk we’ll have to take,” she said evenly.

xTBBTx

University of Oxford: Ultrafast lenseless imaging with OPA-driven high-harmonic generation
It had been a refreshing holiday in Nebraska. Greg, Penny’s brother, was sticking to his bail conditions and staying away from his co-conspirator and meth cook so there was no revocation like last time. As for her nephew he really liked the Hellblazer Volume One Sheldon had picked out at the comic book store.

The only downer part came one morning when it was just her mother and her at the table. Anne wanted Penny to stay home, maybe go back to school. Penny assured her that things were going okay in California and that she wanted to play out the acting shtick as long and as far as she could take it.

Now after a ten hour flight and cab home all Penny wanted to do was get in, say hello to the guys and have a bite to eat from the care package her mother packed. She unlocked her door and entered, taking off her back pack and setting it on the couch before rolling her suitcase to her bedroom door.

It took her a moment before the smell of lemony freshness penetrated her consciousness as she realized she didn’t own any lemon-scented candles. Looking around the living room she noted that everything was in its place: no stray dishes or ramen noodle cups or clothes were in sight.

“Guess he liked the napkin,” Penny smirked.

She went to unpack the foodstuff but stopped short as she opened the refrigerator to see it fully stocked.

Except for milk.

Penny chuckled. “Guess the ‘milk thief’ is still in action.”

She went over to 4A and gave her incomplete knock before opening the door.

“How was your trip?” asked Leonard as he turned his chair to his neighbor.

“Good to be home. Better to be back.”

“How was your trip?” asked Leonard as he turned his chair to his neighbor.

“Good to be home. Better to be back.”

“Your radiance was missed,” agreed Amy. She glanced at Sheldon and nodded.

Sheldon knocked twice on his desk and got up from his seat with a packet of letters in hand and went to Penny.

“Here’s your mail,” he said evenly.

“Thanks,” she said and then gave a bigger smile. “And thanks for you know what although you
didn’t have to do that.”

“I realize it isn’t enough but I wasn’t sure what to get you short of a new car—”

“I don’t need a new car,” Penny said quickly. “I’m just happy you like your gift.”

“More than I could ever say.”

“Good.” She tapped him lightly on the arm with her letters. “Well I better go unpack.”

“Wait!” She turned to Sheldon. He cleared his throat. “You’ve had a long flight and require nourishment. To this end I suggest we go out for dinner. My treat.”

“Thanks but I really don’t feel like driving,” Penny said.

“I’ll drive you,” said Amy as she stood. “After all, you two have so much to catch up on and Leonard’s too busy with his article to drive.”

Leonard raised a curious eyebrow. “Actually I—”

“No need to apologize,” Amy continued as she nearly bore a hole in his head with her eyes. “You can drive them next time.”

“Ah.” A light bulb went on in Leonard’s head. “Sure, thanks Amy.”

“Come, Penny, let’s get you freshened up so you can tell us all about your folky Christmas gathering,” said Amy as she practically shooed Penny from the door.

“Uh, okay. Thanks,” said Penny. “Let me just change and I’ll be ready to go.”

After her door closed Sheldon looked to Amy.

“I’m unsure about this,” he said at last.

“Don’t worry,” the neurobiologist said under her breath. “You’ve conversed with Penny on numerous occasions. Treat this as another meeting only this time you’re gathering particular data.”

“I suppose,” Sheldon said. He straightened his shoulders. “Commencing Project Gorilla.”

XxX

“How was your holiday?” asked Sheldon as they ate.

“It was good. My brother made bail so it was kinda nice having everyone together y’know?” Penny smiled. “By the way, my nephew loved the comic book.”

“Trade paper back.”

“Eh, potAto potAHto. Anyhoo, my Aunt Heather came over with her new beau she met at a neighbor’s barn raising. So funny considering she said she’d never—”

Sheldon shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry I don’t find this interesting.”

Penny smirked. “Alright. What do you want to talk about, Sheldon?”

“Well there’s a lot of things we could talk about. Perhaps the differing climate in Nebraska or maybe you commencing a coital or romantic relationship over the holidays?”
“What? No! God, I ran away from Nebraska, remember?”

“Yes, but Kurt and Justin followed you here.”

Penny snorted. “No more stragglers, I promise.” She swirled the fettuccine with her fork. “But speaking of dates, how was Christmas with Amy?” she asked lightly.

“Alright.”

“Well?” Sheldon looked at her questioningly. “Details, man! It’s your first date.”

Sheldon put down his fork. “How was it a date? Amy came over for dinner and a documentary. You’re frequently at my place for dinner.” He paused. “I somehow doubt watching a documentary is paramount to courtship.”

Penny was confused. “But I thought you were seeing each other?”

“Where did you get such a foolish idea?” tsked Sheldon. “Amy is a girl and a friend but not my girlfriend.”

“So why did you say you were a catch?”

“I don’t understand the context.”

“When Amy said you were meeting her mother you said you were a catch.”

“Ah. Well I would be a catch. I’m gainfully employed, educated, all four wisdom teeth fit neatly in my mouth and my bowel is as regular as a German train schedule.”

“But not her catch,” Penny said to try and clarify things.

“Amy wanted me to pose as her boyfriend so she could get her mother off her back. Apparently she’s supposed to go on minimally one date a year to appease Mrs. Fowler, hence the reason why she was on the dating website.” He frowned slightly. “How did you know about this?”

“I was in the hall with Leonard and heard part of your conversation,” Penny said awkwardly.

“I see.”

He cleared his throat and stared at Penny’s shoulder. “Amy and I have a relationship of the mind. Beyond that I’m not interested in her or anyone else.”

“Oh.”

Sheldon’s stomach tightened at her tone.

“If I was interested in a woman it wouldn’t be Amy,” he added.

“Why not?” gasped Penny. “You two are practically two peas in a pod.”

“Yes but I’m comfortable with our current paradigm and don’t see a reason to change it.” He shrugged. “I’m a believer in homeostasis.”

“Which is?”

“Homeostasis refers to a system’s ability to regulate its internal environment and maintain a constant condition of properties like temperature or pH.”

Penny snorted. “Glad that clears things up.”
“Sarcasm?” She touched her nose twice. “Good, I noticed that. Anyways, what it all boils down to is that I don’t like when things change.”

“So once they’re down they’re set in stone, huh?” She took a sip of cranberry juice.

“Exactly.”

A smirk came to Penny’s lips. “So does that mean you knew we’d be friends right from the beginning?”

“Actually I wished the transvestite with the skin condition would come back to your apartment,” Sheldon admitted.

“Gee thanks.” She took another sip and set the glass back on the table. “So it was really that bad for you?”

“You were annoying.” A pause and then his eyes flashed her face. “You still are.”

“All a part of my charm, Sheldon,” Penny pumpkin grinned.

“So it seems.”

They resumed eating.

“So, got anything planned for New Years?” asked Penny.

“Yes; Stuart is having a costume party. There’s a prize for best dressed group so we’re going.” Here Sheldon sighed. “Although we don’t have a prayer what with Leonard dressing as Superman wearing heeled boots. Who is he trying to kid?”


“Hmm. That could work. That would give us the Flash, Superman, Green Lantern, Bat-Man and Wonder Woman.”

“Who’s not going?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got four guys going with Zack and then Wonder Woman. Who’s that, Amy?”

“Of course not,” Sheldon snorted. “Amy doesn’t believe in dressing up in costume.” Again he sighed. “Raj is going as Wonder Woman.”

Penny chuckled. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh, I wish I was.”

“Wow. Well, good luck with that.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Of course if you’re not doing anything that night—”

“Haven’t checked my messages but I’m sure Gwen has something planned,” Penny said quickly. “You know, it’s New Years.”
“A time best spent with friends and family,” he pointed out.

“Or dancing your butt off.”

“And imbibing alcohol and attracting strange men.”

“It’s called having fun.”

“No, it’s called an STD test at the local health clinic.”

Penny laughed. “Since when did you become all king of coitus?”

“Now you’re just being silly,” snorted Sheldon. “I’m merely suggesting that things needn’t necessarily come to physical relations just because you meet someone of the opposite sex.” Pause. “A supreme intellect can impart knowledge and guidance which is far more appealing if you ask me.”

“Oh really?” Penny said amiably.

“Look, he can solve for Pi to the thirty first number. Hubba hubba,” Sheldon said awkwardly.

Penny took a drink and a little smile came to her face. “God I missed you.”

Zack and Penny entered the party and costume shop.

“So Leonard wants me to be Superman,” he said with a shake of the head. “I dunno if I can handle the responsibility.”

“You’ll be fine, Zack,” Penny said with a smirk. He was a cutie in his jeans and tight black t-shirt but damn he was dumb. The thing was, until she met Sheldon she didn’t know what smart really was. Okay and crazy. And Sheldon was right—genius was kinda hot.

“Too bad you’re busy tonight. It’s going to be awesome at the comic store,” Zack continued as they walked the aisles.

“Yeah, well Gwen’s having a party at her place and she went to my Hallowe’en one so I kinda owe her.”

“Pen, it’s not like New Years happens every year,” he said seriously. “You can party up with Gwen any time. Tonight is special.”

“I know, and I’m spending it with my friends,” she countered. They stopped in the Superhero section and both started flipping through the costumes.

“Ah,” he nodded. “I just thought since he came to the football game that Leonard was your friend.”

“He is my friend. I mean we’re neighbors. Just because we live across from each other doesn’t mean we have to spend every waking moment together.” Pause. “Okay, sure, we eat together most nights and maybe watch movies. Sure he got my tv and money back from Kurt but I have other friends too.”

Zack turned his head to her.

“I thought it was that Sheldon guy who got your stuff back from Kurt?”
Penny woke from her reverie with a start.

“Uh, yeah. He did,” she said.

“Huh. Maybe he should be Superman,” Zack snorted and resumed flipping through costumes. “Leonard said we’d get a trophy if we win. How cool is that?”

“Pretty cool,” Penny said diplomatically as she absently looked through the women’s section. All she was looking forward to was a night of alcoholic bliss and with luck someone to spend the rest of the night. Penny inwardly sighed. Last New Years was spent with Kurt. Then things had horribly changed and she was alone.

*Piercing blue eyes and a pursed lips scowl.*

“Or am I?” she whispered as her hand ran over a gold, red, and blue costume.

XxX

Leonard slipped his mask on his face and in that moment he was a green blur. Add his glasses and the green blur in the mirror became the Green Lantern.

He exited the washroom and came down the hall to meet the rest of the Justice League.

“All hail Green Lantern,” said Howard in his Bat-Man outfit. “All we need is Supes and we’re in business.”

“And what a Superman we have,” beamed Sheldon as he adjusted his Flash cowl. “His blue eyes and dark hair. Why he even has a lock of hair curled on his brow.”

“Yeah, he’s kinda dreamy,” agreed Leonard.

“We’re a dream team,” said Raj with a wide smile and a hand on his hip.

“We’re something, alright,” snorted Howard as he took in Raj’s Wonder Woman outfit.

“Hey, I lost three pounds to get into this so have some respect,” pouted the astrophysicist. “Besides, I think I look good with a big chest. My shoulders don’t look as wide.”

“And on that note, where’s Zack?” asked Leonard.

“Over at Penny’s,” said Sheldon. “But the party starts at nine so we’d better collect him and go.”

They all exited the apartment and while Leonard locked up Sheldon went to Penny’s door.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny and Zack.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny and Zack.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny and Zack.”

The door opened and Sheldon’s eyes widened as he took in Penny’s ample cleavage and blushey face as she stood before him in a Wonder Woman outfit.

“Wow,” Howard squeaked while Raj scowled.

“Hey, I was wondering if I could tag along?” Penny said tentatively as Zack came to stand behind
“I told her we already have a Wonder Woman,” he said. “So if she wanted to come she should be someone else—”

“No!” Sheldon, Leonard and Howard blurted.

The lanky physicist cleared his throat.

“What we mean to say is that you’re more than welcome to join our merry band,” he said before turning to Raj. “Go home and change.”

The astrophysicist whispered furiously into Howard’s ear.

“No one cares that you waxed your legs for this,” Howard snapped. “Penny’s our Wonder Woman.”

“Okay, let me get my purse,” said Penny.

Raj waited for her to depart before stomping his foot. “But I don’t want to be Aquaman! He sucks!”

XxX

Penny scooped some cheese ball with a cracker and popped it into her mouth. It was well after eleven on New Years Eve and she was sober. Now that’s a change. If she was at Gwen’s place there’d be no doubt she’d be sucking face with some guy with a great set of abs and a cute hinnie.

“Maybe Darwin should have been a butt doctor,” Penny snorted.

Zack came over to the snack table. “Great party huh?”

“Be nice if they had some alcohol. Or another girl in the store.”

“Yeah but we have costumes and bobbing for Kryptonite and pin the cape on Bat-Man.” He picked up a bowl of chocolates and offered them to Penny. “Milk Dud?”

Penny chuckled and took some.

Across the way Sheldon was surveying the room and estimated that his group’s version of JLA had the superior costumes. That and his Superman was six feet tall and muscled and Wonder Woman was a female. His eyes caught Penny and Zack munching on food and chatting away.

“They make a cute couple,” said a familiar voice that immediately made Sheldon curl his hands into fists. He turned to see Wil Wheaten in a Green Arrow costume with a drink in hand and a disarming smile on his face. “Hello Sheldon.”

“Hello Wil Wheaton,” Sheldon said icily.

“I noticed you came in with an impressive Justice League.”

“The trophy is more than certainly mine,” Sheldon agreed. “This’ll be twice I best you.”

“I suppose,” Wil said sadly. “Of course it helps you’ve got an amazing Wonder Woman and Superman. So how long have they been dating?”

“They aren’t dating. They’re friends.”
“The way they’re giggling things up? Huh,” said Wil innocently. “I bet they went out at some point. See how easily they touch each other? A hand here, a poke there. Look, she’s feeding him a cheese puff.”

“Unsanitary,” Sheldon said although he found he couldn’t stop looking at Zack and Penny.

“Still it was nice bringing them out.” Wil shrugged. “Who knows, maybe you’ll be responsible for bringing them back together?”

Out of the corner of her eye Penny caught Sheldon and Wil standing together looking at her. Immediately her eyes narrowed and she excused herself from Zack and approached the pair.

“What’s up?” she said lightly as she stared intensely at Wil.

“Just having a conversation,” he said in an equally light tone. “If you’ll excuse me.” He ambled off towards Leonard and Stuart.

“So what did he want?” Penny asked Sheldon.

“Just some inane chatter,” Sheldon said before straightening and clasping his hands behind his back. “Penny, you realize this night is important to me.”

“Sure,” she shrugged. “You want your trophy.”

“That’s right. So you can’t leave with Zack until the judging,” he said evenly.

“Where the hell did you get that from?” she growled in surprise and then her eyes narrowed. “Did that guy say Zack and I were going out—because we so totally aren’t.”

“But you did.”

“Just one night,” she admitted.

“I see.”

Penny rolled her eyes.

“Alright everyone,” said Stuart in a loud voice. “Gather together in your groups for judging. Make it snappy ‘cause midnight’s approaching!”

The people sorted each other out until they formed into several Justice Leagues.

Stuart adjusted his Tom Baker Doctor Who scarf around his neck.

“Okay, and the winner of this year’s costume party is—the Justice League of America.” The room was stock still. “Number three!”

The gang roared in cheers and shouts as they jumped and high fived each other. After regaining some sort of composure Sheldon made his way to Stuart and took the proffered trophy.

“Thank you,” he said. “Given my team’s obvious superiority it’s no surprise that—”


“But I’m not finished!” Sheldon protested.
The rest of the store joined in the count until zero was reached and nothing but loud cheer and noisemakers filled the air.

Before she knew what was what Zack wrapped an arm around Penny’s waist and pulled her in.

“Happy New Years, Pen,” he said and kissed her.

She shortened it up and smiled stiffly at him before turning to see where Sheldon was. The physicist looked away and Penny knew in her sinking stomach that he had seen the kiss.

Immediately Penny went to Leonard.

“Happy New Year!” she said loudly and planted a kiss before leaving a positively stunned Leonard for Raj and gave him a kiss. She turned and there was Howard waiting expectantly. “You’ve got a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, but Leonard has a girlfriend,” Howard pointed out.

“He won’t pervert this,” she said with a crooked smile.

Howard smirked even as he nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Penny came over to Sheldon. “Well, I’d kiss you too but I imagine all the germs would gross you out,” she said lightly.

“Immensely,” he agreed and before he could say anything further Penny wrapped him in a hug. His hand came up and lightly, albeit awkwardly, patted her back.

“Happy New Year, Moonpie,” she said as she leaned back with a goofy grin.

“Don’t call me Moonpie. Only Meemaw can call me that,” he said stiffly.

“And why does she call you that?”

“That’s between her and me.”

“Ya know ya wanna tell me,” Penny winked.

“No, what I want to do is correct your grammar,” he replied evenly. Blue eyes met green. “Happy New Year, Penny.”

“Next up, Comic book trivia!” said Stuart. “Winner gets a twenty dollar store gift certificate.”

Sheldon perked up and Penny could feel his excitement.

“Go kick some ass,” she smiled.

“Language, Penny,” he said with a glint in his eyes.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat down at his desk and answered his Skype call from Amy.

“Happy New Year,” she said evenly.

“And to you,” he replied. “I have an update on Project Gorilla.”
Amy raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I thought you were at the party at the comic book store?”

“I was. Penny decided unexpectedly to join us. She was an integral member of the team and consequently we won the best ensemble trophy.”

“With her smoldering good looks and kind-hearted can-do attitude who couldn’t help but vote for her?”

Sheldon cocked his head. “You seem to be fixated on Penny’s appearance.”

“Am I?” Amy paused to ponder his statement. “She is dazzling. Perhaps I’m being overwhelmed by her radiant aura.”

“Please,” Sheldon snorted. “She’s an ‘actress’ working for minimum wage at a family restaurant not a Nobel Prize laureate.”

“Name me one Nobel Prize laureate more attractive than Penny?”

“Well, Dr. Feynman really did a lot with his shoulder length locks,” mused the physicist.

“Hmm. Before we continue with the experiment perhaps we should better define your sexual orientation. Are you, in fact, bisexual or merely expressing a homosexual observation?”

Sheldon paused. “Well I’m working under the assumption I’m heterosexual. Of course, I’ve never been attracted to anyone sexually or romantically so this is conjecture.” He paused as he remembered Penny in her Wonder Woman outfit. “However I have to say that I do recognize female comeliness.”

“Fair enough,” nodded Amy. “Now, continue your news from last night.”

“We functioned within our defined parameters until the stroke of midnight and the revelry began.” His mouth twitched. “Penny hugged me and called me ‘Moonpie’.”

“That’s good.”

“She also kissed Zack, Leonard and Raj. Obviously she holds us in the same regard.”

“Not necessarily. Does she refer to them by pet names?”

“Not to my knowledge. And Moonpie isn’t her pet name it’s Meemaw’s.” Sheldon frowned. “I have no idea how she learned that.”

“Interesting that she’d delve into your history to find out.” Amy pursed her lips in thought. “There are definite observations but they’re inconclusive. I’ll need to gather more data before we can further refine the experiment.”

“What do you propose?”

“A direct interaction. It’s the only way to ensure we’re on the right track.”

“I suppose.”

Amy leaned forward. “Sheldon, what’s wrong?”

“I’m still unsure about all this.”

“Which is why we need to acquire information quickly and quietly so you can analyze the data.”
It’s the only way to make a clear and concise decision on whether to proceed with a romantic relationship or else remain platonic.”

“Agreed.” Sheldon glanced towards the door. “Leonard’s home.”

“Understood.” The screen went black and Sheldon closed the laptop before retreating to his room.

The phone rang and Penny put Jersey Shore on mute and checked to see who it was.

“Huh,” she said as she recognized the name before answering. “Hello?”

“Hello Penny, it’s Amy Farrah Fowler. How are you physically and emotionally—perhaps even existentially?”

“Uh, fine on all fronts. What’s up?” Penny wondered how Amy got her number. *Must have been Sheldon.*

“I realized that being Sheldon’s neighbor means we’ll be in contact quite frequently so I thought it best we should alter our relationship from acquaintances to friends.”

Penny took a moment to process this and when she did, bit her lip to keep from laughing. *It’s like Sheldon two point oh.* “Uh, sure.”

“It’s my understanding that friendships initiate with outings for hot beverages or a social activity such as a slumber party or shared meal.”

“I guess—although a sleepover is usually something kids do.”

“Oh. That’s too bad. I’ve always wanted to be invited to a slumber party.”

“You never were?”

“Well, there was the time I had my tonsils out, and I shared a room with a little Vietnamese girl. She didn’t make it through the night but up ’til then it was kind of fun.”

“That’s just….” Penny didn’t know what to say. “Wow.”

“I’m sure you were invited to many slumber parties. The makeovers. Initiating phony phone calls. Having spirited pillow fights in your frilly nighties.”

This time Penny couldn’t stop the chuckle from coming out. “More like yapping about boys, watching movies and overdosing on chips, popcorn and pizza.”

“Interesting. And how frequently did you have them?”

“I dunno. Sometimes it was for birthday parties but a lot of the time it just happened where someone came over and stayed late and then it became an all-nighter.”

“Understood.”

“So…want to do coffee sometime?”

“I’d prefer tepid water.”

“Sure. So when’s good for you?”
“How about now?”

“Uh,” Penny considered getting out of her comfy clothes but after pulling a double yesterday she really didn’t want to muster the energy. “I don’t really want to go out. How about Sunday?”

“Sunday’s fine.”

“Okay. There’s a little coffee shop south on Los Robles.”

“I’m familiar with it. I met Sheldon there. Shall we say two o’clock?”

“Two’s fine. … Well I guess I’ll talk to you then.”

“What if I have something imperative to say before then?”

“Then we’ll talk before then.”

“Excellent. Goodbye.”

Penny hung up the phone and set it beside her. She’d say that had to be the strangest conversation she’d had but after knowing Sheldon she knew that was an exaggeration.

She took a sip of pop and wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She stared at her sleeve and laughed.

“Frilly nightie,” she snorted.

XxX

“Man, it’d be nice if there was an app to show me where to get those shoes,” Penny said as she drooled over a particular pair of pumps worn in a cosmetics ad as she flipped through a style magazine.

There was a knock at the door so she turned down the stereo before answering.

“Amy?” she said, surprised.

“Given the scenario of you not wishing to leave your apartment at this time I was left with no other choice but to come over.” Amy held up a grocery bag. “I brought chips and popcorn should our conversation extend far into the night.”

An amused smirk came to Penny’s face. “Come on in.”

Amy entered and placed the junk food on the counter before settling herself down in Sheldon’s chair, placing what looked like an overnight bag beside her feet. She clasped her knees with her hands and sat stiffly.

“Uh, would you like some hot water or tea?” offered Penny. “I’ve also got some wine.”

“Tepid water would be fine. We’ll save the wine for later when we delve into the topic of boys.” She cocked her head. “I’ve brought the snacks. You need to provide the movie.”

“Oh.” Penny thought. “Well, it’s been a while since I’ve seen Grease. It’s a cheesy movie but I like it.”

“I’ve never seen it.”
Penny’s mouth dropped. “You never saw Grease?”

“My mother forbid it. She was afraid it would compel me to join a gang,” explained Amy.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Penny said with a smile as she went to find the dvd.

XxX

“Fine, I’ll take your course,” huffed Leonard. “But I’m still taking Stephanie to Cern.”

“This is beyond a course, Leonard,” Sheldon said icily. “You’re flagrantly disregarding the Roommate Agreement which you signed, I may add, without coercion.”

“I was distracted,” the shorter physicist said. “Besides, I didn’t think half the things in it would ever happen.”

“Why would I waste my time writing impossible scenarios?”

“You mean you expect to be a robot at some point?”

“There are advancements in technology all the time,” sniffed Sheldon. Leonard rolled his eyes.

“Sheldon, I’m taking Stephanie. End of story.”

“But why?” Sheldon pouted. “Ever since I was a child I dreamed of going to Cern. There’s no way Dr. Stephanie could ever appreciate the significance of the collider as I would.”

“The collider’s for me. It’s the rest of the trip that’s for Stephanie.”

Sheldon frowned. “Then why don’t you take a vacation?”

“Because I couldn’t afford the accommodations we’re going to be staying at and wine and dine her at the same time.”

“Then don’t wine and dine her. She already seems satisfied with your typical underachievement. Why buck the trend?”

Leonard sighed. “Sheldon, this is my chance at real quality time. Stephanie’s a doctor and always takes me out to fancy restaurants. I just want to take her someplace fancy for once.”

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “And did she say you had to reciprocate?”

“No, but women like things like this.”

“You didn’t pick this off the internet, did you? Because your previous exploits proved that you’re not cruising the most accurate websites.”

“It’s a social custom,” Leonard said with a scowl. “Traditionally a man treated a woman to outings. Nowadays we alternate but I want to really wow her.” Sheldon pursed his lips. “Look, if you ever find another one of your species I’m more than willing to give up the opportunity so you could take her somewhere special.”

“Alright.” Sheldon thought for a moment. “Then as of this moment if I’m ever invited to a pool party at Bill Gates’ house you are hereby not invited.”

“Fair enough,” Leonard said.
“So anyways, the visit was nice but if I’d stayed any longer I would have gone insane,” said Penny as she sat stretched out on the couch in her comfy pajama bottoms and pink cami. “Completely reminded me why I left Nebraska.” She took a sip of wine.

Amy nodded. “While I didn’t feel the siren call of Hollywood I, too, wished to leave my childhood dwelling.”

“Ah. Things bad at home?”

“Far from it. It was a refuge from a world of friendlessness and loneliness.” She took a sip of wine. “My mother was the only one to sign my yearbook. ‘Dear Amy, self-respect and a hymen are better than friends and fun. Love, Mom.’”

“Wow.” Penny took a big gulp of wine. “You mean you never had any friends?”

“Well I did eat my lunch with the school janitor until his wife called me a puta.”

“Crap Amy, that’s terrible.”

“I can’t say it was enjoyable but it’s in the past now,” soothed Amy. “Although I doubt someone as invigorating as yourself would have to deal with awkward social interactions with men.” Penny snorted.

“You should have been at Kurt’s and my apartment the last month before I moved out.” Amy raised an inquiring eyebrow. “Kurt’s my ex. He cheated on me and then I moved here.”

“So you never would have met Sheldon if Kurt hadn’t cheated.” Amy took a sip of wine.

“I guess.” Penny smirked. “Never thought about it that way. Guess our meeting was destiny.”

“I don’t know if I would go that far but it is fortuitous.”

“Yeah.” Both women sipped their drinks. “You ever have a boyfriend?”

“While I desire friendships I find romantic relationships to be an unnecessary cultural construct.”

“Ah, they’re not that bad Ames.”

“My best boyfriend to date is Armen the miniature horse breeder. I made him up to get mother off my back. Unfortunately things unraveled when I couldn’t fabricate where we had met.”

“At a miniature horse show?” offered Penny.

Amy cocked her head. “Where were you three years ago?”

“Happens to the best of us,” Penny giggled. “Actually, I’m not gonna knock you ‘cause I’m ‘seeing’ a fake boyfriend at the moment.”

“Oh?”

“This goes no where but I told my parents I was dating Sheldon.”


“Dad was getting on how I should come home and that being in California by myself was a bad
idea and how I never seem to pick good guys. And then Sheldon came to mind. Mom knows I’m living across the hall from him. He’s a doctor so they’d be impressed. I mean it’s not like mom and dad are going to meet him.” Penny blanched. “I suppose I should have run this by you.”

“Why? Sheldon and I are friends, nothing more.” Amy poured Penny another glass of wine. “But you’re right Sheldon would be a grand candidate for a romantic partner.”

“Sheldon?” Penny said, amused. “Mister ‘get away from me you’re germy’?”

“He has a plethora of quality traits. He’s hygienic, punctual, gainfully employed.” A flit of a smile crossed Amy’s lips. “He cracks me up.”

“Yeah, me too.” Penny took a sip of wine.

“Do you find him attractive?”

Penny choked and took a moment to get herself together.

“So that’s a no?” asked Amy.

“I didn’t say that,” gasped Penny. “I just never thought about him that way.” Liar. Liar. She caught Amy’s stare. “I mean, sure, he has a cute butt and his eyes are out of this world but I never really thought about it because he’s ‘Dr. C’, y’know?”

Amy set her glass on the coffee table and took a chip from the bowl. “Genetically speaking you would produce comely offspring should you mate.”

“What?” Penny said, wide-eyed.

“Your buxom looks and his tall stature, long fingers and ‘cute butt’.”

“He’s not interested in anyone Ames.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me.”

“When?”

“Before New Years. He took me out to dinner and wanted to know if I was seeing anybody.” Penny paused. “For a moment I thought he was interested, y’know? Then he said he wasn’t interested in anybody.”

“You mean ‘just’ anybody,” amended Amy. “It’d take an extraordinary female to be his companion. She’d have to be strong-willed and engaging and—”

“Have the patience of a saint,” Penny chortled.

“In some regard. Sheldon really needs guidance. Someone with a strong but gentle touch.” Amy glanced knowingly at Penny. “Leonard tells me you really brought Sheldon out of his shell.”

“I guess.” Penny smiled at the memory. “You know he used to order his comic books and groceries online?”

“And now he ventures out into the world. All thanks to you.” Pause. “You must really like him to put so much effort into him.”
“Yeah, I do,” Penny said softly. “He’s awesome.”

“That he is.” Amy clapped her hands against her knees before standing. “Come on bestie, let’s go into your bedroom so we can have a pillow fight in our frilly nighties before bed.”

“‘Bestie’?”

“After this heart to heart chat how else could we describe our relationship?”

Penny shook her head. “Are you sure you aren’t related to Sheldon?”

Sheldon sat with his back against his propped up pillow on his bed with his laptop on his knees. His stomach had been giving him trouble all day and the closer it got to seven o’clock when Amy and he were supposed to Skype the more his discomfort increased.

He checked his watch and counted down until at seven on the atomic clock dot he rang Amy.

“Good evening, Sheldon,” said the neurobiologist.

“Enough with the social pleasantries,” Sheldon said, annoyed. “So how did it go?”

“Interesting. Penny is infinitely more delightful than is humanly possible. You’re lucky we aren’t in the practice of providing a dowry for your bride because she’d fetch a unicorn.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Focus, Dr. Fowler.”

“As a positive, she finds your secondary sexual characteristics appealing.”

“Not what I was going for but acceptable.”

“She also thinks you’re ‘awesome’.”

“Naturally.” Here he frowned. “I’m sensing an impending negativity.”

“A definite snag. Penny claims that in a dinner conversation you told her that you weren’t interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with anyone.”

“I’m not.”

“Then why are we having this discussion?”

“Because Leonard and you insist I ‘like’ Penny.”

“Your denial is fascinating.”

Sheldon glanced around the room in thought before returning his gaze to the computer screen.

“Is this salvageable?” he asked.

“I believe so. At the very least it isn’t irreparably damaged. You’ll have to ‘up the ante’ to get her attention.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Wouldn’t that make me obvious? Suppose she ends up ‘liking’ me and I decide we should remain friends?”
“So you’d prefer keeping things as they are?”

“Homeostasis,” Sheldon said firmly.

“Schroedinger’s Cat,” Amy said right back.

“Well, when you put it that way,” Sheldon conceded. “Alright. I’ll give this some thought.”

“Perhaps look into procuring a pair of jeans.”

“Why?”

“Penny likes your buttocks.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“Sheldon, physical attraction is a powerful tool. Use it to your advantage.” Amy cracked a smile. “Shake that booty.”

“Really Amy?” tsked Sheldon.

“Flaunt what you’ve got.”

“By that token I should sit Penny down and go over my academic awards.”

“There’s more to you than science. Show your diversity.”

“Well, there is the trophy I won for being the co-captain of the East Texas Christian Youth Holy Roller Bowling League championship team. Seven to twelve year-old division.” He paused. “But then again I don’t want to portray myself as a jock.”

“I don’t believe that will be a problem,” said Amy.
Penny crossed the hall and entered 4A. Inside Sheldon and Raj sat on the couch while Stephanie was in Leonard’s stuffed chair texting away on her phone.

“Where’s dinner?” the Nebraskan asked. She went for the antibacterial spray only to notice it was missing. “And where’s the germ away spray?”

Sheldon clacked away at the laptop on his thighs.

“Dr. Stephanie said not to use it directly on the skin,” said a computer voice.

“Ah. So it’s alright if I come in with my flip-flops?”

Clack clack clack. “There is a pair of slippers for you to wear.”

“Thanks Sheldon.” Penny noted the pink slip-ons and put them on.

Clack clack clack. “No need to thank me. I took their cost out of next week’s tip.”

“Gee thanks,” she snorted and came to the couch. “What’s with the Shelbot voice anyhoo?”

Clack clack. “Inflamed larynx.” Sheldon delicately stroked his neck with his fingers.

“That sucks.” She noted the big cardboard box on the table and looked inside. “Whose junk is this?”

Immediately Sheldon and Raj sat straight and gave her a shocked look.

Clack. “Collectables.”

Stephanie put away her phone. “Hard to tell the difference, I know, but apparently there’s enough of one to make four grown men spend fifty bucks at a garage sale on it instead of buying dinner.”

Penny reached into the box and pulled out a stuffed Alf doll. “Fifty bucks for this?” Raj reached up and snatched the doll from her hands and cuddled it.

Clack clack clack. “It works out to thirteen twenty five apiece which is more than reasonable,” said Sheldon. Raj smiled and nodded.

Stephanie shrugged. “Still seems like a lot to pay for a toy ring.”

Sheldon frowned before getting up and storming to his room.

“Should I even ask?” said Penny as she sat on the couch.

“When I got here the guys were fighting over a ring Sheldon found in the box,” explained Stephanie. “I sent Leonard out with Howard to pick up dinner so things’d calm down.”

“Ah.” Penny leaned back on the couch. “So when did Sheldon strain his throat? He seemed
“Alright this morning.”

“More like he strained my ears,” Stephanie replied. “He was driving me nuts arguing with Leonard that when his voice cracked and he cleared his throat I told him to stop talking.” She smiled sweetly. “I performed a Sheldonectomy.”

Raj gave a muffled snicker as Sheldon returned to the living room and sat in his spot. He held out a ring on a chain which Penny took to examine.

Clack clack clack. “I found this in the box. It’s a prop from The Lord of the Rings.” Clack clack clack. “I gave up all rights to the rest of my share of the box. By marine salvage rights the ring is mine.”

Penny was puzzled. “How does that apply? We’re not on a boat.”

Clack clack. “Now don’t you start.” Sheldon scowled at his neighbor.

“Not starting. Just asking,” Penny soothed as she looked at the ring’s etchings. “What’s the number for?”

“That’s what started World War Three,” said Stephanie. “Howard thinks it's a limited edition ring and worth money.”

Clack clack clack. “It’s only worth something if I decide to sell it.” Clack clack. “Which I’m not.”

The door opened and Leonard and Howard entered. Immediately Sheldon snatched the ring from Penny and scampered to his room.

“Food or find another treasure trove on the way back?” Stephanie teased her boyfriend.

“Food this time,” replied Leonard as he came across the room to the coffee table and set down the Chinese food before moving the toy box to the floor.

As Penny handed out the food packets Sheldon returned to the living room sans computer and sat. The Nebraskan opened the dumpling container and made a quick count.

“Perfect. Six of us and six of them,” she said cheerily before taking her piece.

“Isn’t that nice?” Leonard said with a saccharine tone. “We *share* the dumplings. We all bought the dumplings so we *share* whatever dumplings are in the package.”

In response both Sheldon and Stephanie glared at the experimental physicist.

“Drop it, Leonard,” she warned.

“How about this,” said Penny. “If Sheldon at any time decides to sell the ring the money gets divided evenly.”

“Sounds good,” said Howard.

“And we take turns holding onto it,” added Leonard.

Sheldon opened his mouth to speak but quickly closed it as he remembered his medical condition. Flushing, he grabbed his dumpling with his chop sticks and carried his food container to his bedroom.

“You know, it might be the One Ring after all since it has the power to shut Sheldon up,” Howard
With coffee cup in hand Penny knocked twice at 4A before entering wearing her Hello Kitty shorts and pink sleep top. She went straight to Leonard who had the coffee pot in hand and got her morning fix.

“If you’re going to steal my milk finish up the old carton,” said Sheldon from the couch.

Penny obliged and took a sip of her creamed coffee before giving a contented sigh.

“Good morning,” she said and warmed her hands on the mug.

“You really should do something about your dependency,” tsked Sheldon.

“You’re telling me there’s nothing you’re hooked on?”

“He does eat an inordinate amount of Red Vines,” noted Leonard.

“It’s not like imbibing them alters my personality,” Sheldon sniffed.

Leonard snorted. “We couldn’t go to two theaters because they sold Twizzlers not Red Vines.”

“There were more mitigating factors than that, Leonard,” Sheldon scowled. “For instance they also lacked Icees.”

“They had Slushies.”

The lanky man shook his head derisively. “In what universe is a Slushie an Icee?” The phone rang and he picked it up. “Really, Leonard, you’re embarrassing yourself.” He answered. “Hello? … And good morning to you, President Siebert.”

As Sheldon talked Penny took a sip of coffee.

“That reminds me,” she said. “How did the benefit go last night?”

“About as well as could be expected,” Leonard said sheepishly. “I couldn’t get a thing out right, Raj’s nervous bladder kept him in the washroom, Howard kept bringing up his space toilet and, well, Sheldon was Sheldon.”

“Well the bright side is that you’re all still employed so that’s a plus,” Penny chuckled before taking a sip of coffee.

“True,” nodded Leonard. “And I can’t say that the benefactors were all bad. At the end of the night one nice older lady offered to drive Raj home in her limo.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Here’s hoping he didn’t drink.”

“No, he was good so that car ride must have been pretty silent.” He shrugged. “She did seem pretty adamant that she wanted to talk to him about buying some lab equipment.”

“She did, huh?” Penny’s mouth curved into a knowing smirk. Talked, my ass. She looked to Leonard and decided not to say anything. He wouldn’t know an innuendo if it were a brick to the head.

“Yes…Thank you. Goodbye.” Sheldon hung up the phone and came over to the kitchen counter.
“Still employed, sweetie?” asked Penny.

“Was there any doubt?” Sheldon replied. Before she could answer he continued. “Apparently I impressed the benefactors last night. So much so that President Siebert said I no longer need to attend any of their social gatherings ever again. In fact one benefactor even offered to send me to the Arctic.”

“You’re kidding,” Penny snorted.

“Why would I kid?” He paused. “Perhaps I need an indicator of some sort to note when I’m joking.”

“Focus, Sheldon,” Penny said. Now that she realized he was serious her good mood was gone. “I mean what could you possibly do up there?”

Sheldon tilted his head in thought. “I suppose I could pursue my research into finding magnetic monopoles.”

“They’re too difficult to find,” countered Leonard.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I’ve worked up some posits worth trying.”

“Is Gablehauser going to loan you a scintillation counter for ionization?”

“I’m not following an excitation loss technique,” replied Sheldon as he clasped his hands behind his back. “To my mind the best technique for detection would be based on electromagnetic induction. The passage of a magnetic monopole in a superconducting loop.”

“I know that,” scowled Leonard. “The only thing is that I can’t see it as a large area detector.”

“I don’t need a large detector.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Unless I was permanently assigned to the Arctic.”

“Which could be a possibility,” said Leonard as he thought back to the party and Sheldon’s ‘Don’t touch me!’ shouts and overall condescending tone.

“You wouldn’t leave here would you?” asked Penny.

“I suppose I could give my posits into the hands of someone more capable than I of conducting the expedition.” A small smile flickered across his mouth. “Bazinga.”

“Okay, so how big do you think you can make it?” asked Leonard.

“Depends on the size of the collecting coil.”

The experimental physicist straightened. “Unless you couple it to an input coil.”

Sheldon’s eyes brightened. “And for a superconducting coil with N turns and inductance L I could—” He went to his whiteboard, wiped out a clear spot, and began to write out a series of what Penny took to be equations.

Leonard came over to stand by his roommate and read as Sheldon wrote.

“The change in current will occur with a characteristic time, blrv, where b=radius of coil and v=velocity of the monopole,” said Sheldon.
“Okay,” Leonard said excitedly. “And to see the change in current you’d need a magnetometer of some sort.”

“Already covered. I’m coupling the detection coil to a SQUID.”

“Brilliant.”

“Of course. Now in order to shield the magnetometer I thought it best to….”

Penny made her way to the door and slipped out into the hall. She entered her apartment and went to her sink and poured out the rest of her coffee. Her stomach suddenly decided it didn’t want it and she wasn’t going to force it.

She went to her couch, flopped down, and picked up the remote but didn’t turn on the television.

The Arctic.

“Son of a bitch,” she whispered.

XxX

Sheldon read over the influx of emails from the National Science Foundation regarding their trip to the Arctic Circle. Due to a dramatic donation they now had space for Sheldon’s monopole experiment. He was just amazed at how fast the information flew as he merely mentioned his idea to President Siebert on the phone and here it was eleven hour later and the NSF was waiting for him to confirm his place on their expedition.

According to the itinerary he’d be at the magnetic pole for three months; three months in which to find the elusive slow moving monopoles. A warmth filled his chest as Sheldon thought about his possible success. He’d be assured a Nobel Prize, something which he wanted since the first time he heard about the elusive and highly sought after award. At long last he’d receive the recognition he knew he deserved. All it would take was three months in the Arctic.

Three months away from Penny.

“This is stupid,” Sheldon frowned as his abdominal muscles contracted. His first love was science and he meant to uphold his fidelity. There could be no compromise if he was to achieve greatness. Leonard was a fool if he thought bringing Stephanie on his trip to Cern was a good idea. Science was brilliant and pure and—

*‘Women like things like that.’*

Sheldon clicked to his own itinerary. He’d need a support team if he was to go. Leonard wasn’t the best experimental physicist but his work was adequate to fit the bill given proper oversight. Howard was good at his job, not that engineering was anything to write home about, and would be an asset to the expedition. As for Raj, he could be a flunky, a Star Trek red shirt of the team.

Sheldon nodded. This was more than doable.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper, Nobel Prize laureate,” he murmured to himself.

xTBBTx

Sheldon came down the hall just as Leonard came into the apartment.

“Ah, Leonard, just the man I want to see,” the lanky physicist said cheerily.
“What do you want?” Leonard said warily as he sprayed the bottoms of his shoes. The no-spraying of feet was brought up at the weekly roommate meeting and after consultation with Stephanie the agreement was that shoes and slippers had to be sprayed but not bare feet. To this end Penny had a permanent pair of slippers assigned to her and all other guests were to be given disposable foot coverings. Leonard still thought this was overkill but lacked the votes to overturn Sheldon’s majority of one plus the tie breaker.

“I’ve tentatively decided to accept President Siebert’s offer and go to—”

“That’s terrific!” Leonard said enthusiastically. He noted Sheldon’s frown at having been cut off. “Sorry, sorry, continue.”

“—Go to the magnetic North Pole in order to work on my monopole project.”

“When do you go?” asked Leonard as he sat on the couch.

“Well I need to gather supplies and get a physical and whatnot. The tentative date is in three weeks. I told Siebert that I was unsure if I could make it given that my detector wasn’t built yet and he was kind enough to offer the engineering department. He said he would make it a top priority to see me ready to go. Isn’t that nice?”

Leonard gave a slight smirk. “Yeah, he’s a peach.”

“The next thing I have to do is assemble a support team to accompany me,” said Sheldon as he glanced at his clip board and made a note. “Normally I’d go through a vetting process but Siebert did express an urgency so I thought why not employ the resources around me.” He straightened. “I’m offering you the opportunity to make history, Leonard.”

“You want me to go to the Arctic. With you. For three months.”

“That’s correct.”

“Huh.” Leonard took a moment to think.

Sheldon was incredulous. “What’s there to ‘huh’ about? Leonard, this is a Nobel Prize we’re talking about.”

“For you,” amended the short physicist. “I dunno. I’ll have to talk it over with Stephanie.”

“I was thinking of asking her to come but I didn’t want to be too presumptuous given her hours at the hospital,” said Sheldon.

“Sheldon, she’s not going. I mean I don’t know if I’m going to go.”

“Why not?” gasped Sheldon.

“Three months”—*with you*—“is a long time to be away,” Leonard began.

“Oh pish. Meemaw and Pop-Pop were separated when he went to Korea and that didn’t break their relationship.”

“But it also means I’d miss my trip to Cern.”

“There’ll be other trips, Leonard.”

Leonard shrugged. “Like I said I’ll have to talk it over with Stephanie.”
“But we’re talking it over now,” countered Sheldon.

“We’re not a couple. Stephanie and I are so we have to deal with things as a couple.”

Sheldon snorted. “You’re two individuals who’ve decided to pair bond not conjoined twins. The individual can’t be lost to the collective.”

“I’m not a Borg,” snapped Leonard. “Besides, have you told Penny yet?”

“Told Penny what?”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “That you’re going to the Arctic for three months!”

The East Texan flipped a couple of pages. “I already have my farewell to Penny scheduled in for the morning of departure.”

“You should talk to her about it before hand. Like now.”

“Fine,” Sheldon sighed and went to the door. “What am I supposed to say?”

“What you feel.”

Sheldon stood to regard his roommate and scoffed before stepping across the hall.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“‘Sup?” asked Penny as she opened her door.

Sheldon made to speak but hesitated as he took in his neighbor’s eyes before staring just over her shoulder.

“I’m here to inform you of my decision to accept President Siebert’s offer and go to the Arctic,” he said.

“That’s great,” Penny said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Sarcasm?”

“What? No! Of course not!”

Sheldon cocked his head. “It’s just that your tone isn’t as melodious as it usually is when you’re happy about something.”

Penny shrugged. “I was just thinking about something and got distracted.” She turned and went to her couch and sat. Sheldon followed although he remained standing.

“So, the Arctic,” Penny began, this time making sure to sound upbeat. “How long would you be gone?”

“Three months. I’ve asked Leonard if he would accompany me but apparently he has to ‘discuss’ the offer with Dr. Stephanie,” Sheldon tsked.

“Well they are a couple.”
Sheldon was puzzled. “Why should that matter? Leonard’s being offered a once in the lifetime opportunity to travel to a place in the world few have been to assist in possibly finding a paradigm altering discovery.”

“Yeah, how can any girl measure up to that?” Penny said quietly.

“It’s not a competition, it’s an opportunity to see something no one else ever has,” Sheldon said earnestly. “I’m a scientist. It’s what we do. Something which Leonard has forgotten.”

“So if you had a girlfriend and she wanted you to stay you’d go anyways?”

“Three states of matter are surrounding me,” Sheldon sang. “‘As solid, liquid, and gas you see; and water can be all three—Ice! Water! Air! Water can be all three.’” He gently cleared his throat. “That was the first song I heard on Professor Proton’s Science Show when I was 15 months old. I’d ask mother for an ice cube and I’d sit on the porch and watch it melt to a puddle in the sun.”

“Pause. ‘To this day my favorite drink is a ‘Three States of Matter Mocha’ consisting of hot water and cocoa with an added ice cube.’” Another pause as he gathered himself before looking Penny in the face. “My girlfriend would understand because she’d be a dreamer. Just like me.”

Penny stood and wrapped her arms around him.

“Come back safe,” she sniffled.

“Penny, when don’t I act with caution?” Sheldon admonished lightly.

She leaned back even though her arms were still around his waist. He noted her impish smile and glistening eyes.

“How ‘bout like now when you’re nit-picking a girl who’s trying to say goodbye to her friend?”

“Well, when you put it that way.” A twitchy smile passed over his lips. “I’m a downright daredevil.”

“Whackadoodle,” Penny laughed and gave him a last squeeze before letting go.

xTBBTx

“To the adventurers!” toasted Leonard before everyone in the living room touched glasses and drank.

“We’ll miss you, buddy,” said Raj.

“Yeah,” said the experimental physicist a tad wistfully. “Still, I’ll bring back as many pictures as I can from Cern.”

“Don’t forget the chocolate,” Amy said.

“Just think, this time next week you’ll be in the Arctic,” grinned Penny to Sheldon.

“And crazily enough I’m accompanying him,” mused Howard before he got a light slap on the arm by Bernadette.

“I wish I could go but I’ve got to finish my thesis,” she squeaked.

“Not everyone can make history, Bernadette,” sniffed Sheldon. “Your boyfriend will be on the verge of watching someone achieve greatness.” Raj chuckled.
“As a reminder, you’re coming with us,” Howard said to his best friend, causing the astrophysicist to lose his smile.

“Don’t forget to go over the apartment schedule I’ve left,” Sheldon said to Leonard.

“I’ve got your email and Facebook post and printout on the refrigerator,” replied his roommate. “I’ll be sure to air out your bedroom, feed your goldfish and….”

“And pick up my preselected comics at the shop.” Sheldon shook his head. “Good thing Amy has a copy of my schedule so someone close at hand can direct you.”

“What about me?” Penny pouted. Amy leaned towards her.

“You’re the muscle,” the neurobiologist stage whispered. For her part Penny grinned at Leonard and cracked her knuckles. Amy sighed. “Three months. It’ll be boring without your whimsy, Sheldon. I don’t know what I’ll do for fun.” She indicated Penny with a nod of the head. “Thank goodness I’ve got my bestie.”

“I can hang out, too,” said Bernadette. Amy gave her a placating smile and looked to Penny.

“Sure. It’ll be fun,” said Penny. “You know, girls nights and whatnot.”

“Too bad I’ll miss them,” said Stephanie as she sipped on her wine.

“No, Leonard can come too,” said Howard. “He cries like a girl so that counts for something.” Leonard scowled at his friend.

“I know he does,” gushed Stephanie. “And don’t forget he plays with dolls.”

“Action figures,” all four men said at once.

“Not that anyone’s being particular or anything,” giggled Bernadette. “I keep telling Howie he has enough toy rockets to make holes in the moon.”

“Which would be made of cheese, if we kept up the analogy,” said Amy.

Howard was grumped. “They’re not toys, they’re models. And yes, I know the moon isn’t made of cheese, thank you very much.”

“It’s true,” agreed Sheldon. “He answered correctly on the science part of the Friendship Quiz.” His eyes narrowed at Raj. “Unlike some people.”

“I had lysine but I erased it,” Raj pouted.

“Coulda, woulda, shoulda, Raj.” Sheldon tsked. “Still, look at the tremendous opportunity you’ll have to learn my idiosyncrasies as we spend the next three months bunked together in a single room with the wilds of the Arctic surrounding us.”

“Yeah, we really didn’t think this through,” said Howard.

“Don’t worry Howard,” said Sheldon amiably as he stood and went to the refrigerator for more grape juice. “That’s why up there I’ll be thinking for you.”

Penny gripped her nails into Howard’s knee.

“You’re not allowed to kill him,” she warned. Silence. “Howard.”
“Kill Sheldon?” Howard gave a half-smile. “Penny, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“At least what he’d admit publicly,” chuckled Raj.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Penny’s eyes opened and, heart racing, looked at the clock. Five thirty am.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

She leapt out of bed and shot to the door—and waited.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

She opened the door and in that moment took in every detail she could muster about her lanky neighbor from his brown plaid pants and Green Lantern t-shirt to the artful dodging of his blue eyes from her gaze.

“So you’re off?” she asked.

“We’re departing, yes.”

“Oh, I’ve got something for you!” She went to her couch and brought back a blanket.

“Penny, they already have blankets there.”

“Yeah, but do any of them have sleeves?” she asked as she let the blanket hang so the sleeves could be seen.

“Clever,” said Sheldon. He took the blanket. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

Silence.

“You can follow my progress on Facebook,” Sheldon said.

“I will.”

More silence.

“Try to keep your apartment tidy. I can’t return on weekends to clean it for you.”

Penny smiled. “Goodbye Sheldon.”

“Goodbye Penny.” He gave a twitchy smile and returned to his apartment.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Penny said softly before closing her door.

Penny grabbed her coffee cup and made her way to 4A for her caffeine fix. She chuckled as she took in Leonard sitting in Sheldon’s spot on the couch with his feet on the coffee table eating a bowl of cereal.
“Feel free to make yourself at home,” she quipped and sprayed her slipper bottoms before crossing the room to the kitchen.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” grinned Leonard. “No scheduling around bowel movements or watching the Weather Network all morning in case something changes in the ten minutes between the current conditions postings.”

Penny noticed a mug and sandwich plate in the sink.

“Guess Stephanie was off early,” she said as she went into the refrigerator. Inwardly she sighed as she took Leonard’s almond milk. *Looks like the milk thief is gonna have to buy her own milk.*

“Yeah, she started at seven.”

“As Penny put the milk back she noticed a variety of milk products in the refrigerator such as yoghurt, brick cheese and cottage cheese. “Boy, Steph’s really moved herself in here, huh?”

“Moved in? Naa,” said Leonard as he munched on his cereal. “I mean she’s over a lot but she hasn’t moved in.”

Penny smirked. “How many nights has it been since Sheldon left?”

“Six.”

“How many nights has she stayed over?”

Leonard was no longer smiling. “Six.”

Penny swallowed her sip of coffee. “Well this gives you a trial run to see if you like being with her full time.”

“I guess,” the physicist said a tad unsure.

“So,” Penny said enthusiastically in an attempt to change the subject. “How’s Sheldon doing? I’ve looked at his Facebook page and can’t make hide nor hair of his sciencey speak.”

“They’ve got the detector set up and so far they haven’t found anything but it’s early yet.”

Leonard set his empty bowl on the coffee table. “It’s hard trying to account for the ionization losses and induced nucleon decay since he has to know if the monopole can transfer enough energy to an electron in the ice so that it emits Cherenkov radiation. From there he can estimate the maximum energy transfer from a monopole to an electron, if he assumes a—” He glanced up and noted Penny’s crooked smile. “Sheldon’s doing okay.”

“Nice to know.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Hasn’t he talked to you?”

“Not outside of his Facebook updates. I mean it’s nice to know Howard hasn’t killed him yet but —” Here she shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I’ll see him soon enough.” She took another gulp of coffee. “Well I better skedaddle if I’m gonna get my jog in before work. Thanks again.”

“No problem.”

Leonard waited until Penny had left before venturing to his laptop and fired off an email to Sheldon:
'Send Penny a personal note so she knows you’re ok. And that you miss her.'

XxX

Penny yawned as she sat on her couch and logged into her Facebook account. The afternoon shift at the restaurant was busy to the point where she regretted going for a jog beforehand. Still, she needed to burn off some of the excess calories she’d been consuming as she munched on junk food and watched movies. Since Leonard and Stephanie were alone she knew enough to give them their space. Penny snorted. Even though Leonard still insisted they weren’t living together.

She looked over the updates and saw that Gwen broke up with Tim (again), Amy had successfully gotten her monkey hooked on cigarettes and Bernadette missed her Tushie Face with his tight hoochie pants.

“Too much information,” Penny snickered.

She noted that she had a message and clicked on her email. Immediately her stomach fluttered as it was from Sheldon:

‘Penny,

After seven days of irregularity my digestive system seems to have adapted to our freeze-dried cuisine, temperature and time change. Bowel movements occurred at 7:55 am and 7:50 pm. The outside temperature was -25F and we had 18.06 hours of sunlight in which to work.

I haven’t found the monopole. I shall recalibrate the detector tomorrow.

Your blanket has been indispensible.

Regards, Dr. Sheldon Cooper’

"Well at least he didn’t send me a poop flow chart," she chuckled. She hit ‘Reply’ and began to type:

‘Hey Sheldon!

Sorry to hear you’ve had no luck with the monopole but I’m sure if anyone can find it, it’ll be you. :)

Holy crap that’s cold! Brr! So I guess you haven’t been out for a snowball fight yet, huh?

Have you all driven each other nuts yet? It’s been really quiet here without you guys.

Glad you like your blanket. :) Stay safe! P’

xTBBTx

Penny dragged herself up the last few steps to her floor. If management didn’t fix the elevator soon she’d rent a cherry picker and park it under her window.

“Out!” came Leonard’s voice from 4A. “Shoo! Aww, not there!”

The Nebraskan went to his door and knocked.

“You okay in there?” she asked as she opened the door.
“Close the door!” yelled Leonard and she complied. “I mean you can come in but close it quick!” Penny did as she was told.

“What’s the big—” She spotted a gigantic blue bird on the kitchen counter. “You got a bird?”

“No I didn’t get a bird, it just flew in when I was airing out the place,” Leonard growled as he absentmindedly scratched his leg covered in brown wool pants.

“Did you burn something?”

“Sort of. Stephanie left some incense burning this morning and the entire place just reeks to—” He caught Penny’s amused look. “She hasn’t moved in. She’s just staying over.”

“Is that a bird on your sweater?” she said innocently.

Leonard looked down at the blue silhouette set dead center on the sweater.

“Yeah, Stephanie got it for me.” He gave a brave smile as he scratched his other leg. “I think it’s kinda playful.”

“What is it Sheldon calls those ‘you’ll be assimilated’ guys?”

Leonard pursed his lips. “I’m not a Borg.” He scratched his butt.

“Definitely not, Bird-Boy. Now let’s get your mascot out of here.” Both of Leonard’s hands began scratching his thighs like mad. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve gotta get these pants off! Chase the bird to the window and I’ll be back!” Leonard darted to his room.

“Well, looks like it’s just you and me,” Penny said to the blue jay. She slowly made her way around the counter before whooshing her hands towards the bird.

The blue jay took off and flew around the apartment twice before setting down.

“Oh, this is too perfect,” Penny laughed as she pulled out her phone.

XxX

After a long day realigning the detector Sheldon spent the rest of the evening wrapped in his Snuggee typing up reports as Raj and Howard were watching movies at another camp. So far things were not going according to plan. The monopole was nowhere to be seen, the supply of reconstituted brown rice was short two boxes, Howard was driving him nuts scavenging through the living space looking for parts to make a crossbow of all things.

And he missed Penny.

Sheldon tried the internet connection and after a moment clicked onto his Facebook page. He looked over the updates and his eyes narrowed at a photo of a blue jay perched on his spot on the couch.

There was a knock at the door and then it opened and a man entered bundled up in a parka and sealskin mitts.

“You’ve got the wrong camp,” Sheldon said.
“Isn’t this the Cooper Team?” the man replied as he pulled back his hood to reveal an orange toque and a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee.

“Yes this is. Please come in.”

“Thanks.” The man unzipped his parka and took it off. His mitts were on a leather string and stayed with the coat. “I’m Marc Gionet. So I hear you’re trying to detect magnetic monopoles. Any luck?”

“You’d have heard my shout of joy as I did cartwheels through the encampment,” replied Sheldon.

“Yeah, they’re tough to find, eh? We’re in the middle of collecting ice cores to bring back to the SNOlab Neutrino Observatory to see if we can spot the nucleon decay of subrelativistic magnetic monopoles from the GUT era.”

“Interesting,” said Sheldon as he got up and indicated the couch. “Have a seat. Not there! That’s where I sit.” Marc moved to the other side of the couch and Sheldon sat down. “I assume you’re trying to detect the Cherenkov light from such decays in order to detect the monopoles.”

“Bingo.”

“Well good luck with that. The sensitivity levels needed to record that are beyond my equipment’s capacity.”

Marc wiggled his eyebrows. “But what if there was better equipment?”

“Such as?”

“SNOlab’s building a dedicated Slow Monopole Trigger which increases the overall sensitivity by more than an order of magnitude while triggering on muons and suppressing noise.”

Sheldon was impressed. “Fascinating.”

“I’d really like it if you could spare some time to see what we’re doing,” said Marc. “I saw your detector out there and it’s really impressive. I’d love to see if you could offer a suggestion or two about ours.”

“Let me get my coat,” Sheldon said excitedly. He got up and went to his laptop and typed something before logging off and venturing to the coat cupboard for his parka and boots.

XxX

On her break Penny logged onto Facebook and chuckled.

Underneath the blue jay photo was a single line:

Sheldon Cooper: That’s a strike.

xTBBTx

“Is it time?” asked Bernadette excitedly as she rested on her knees in front of Leonard’s laptop that sat on the coffee table.

“Thirty seconds,” said Leonard as Amy, Penny, Stephanie and he crowded around the computer.
At precisely nine pm they got a Skype call. Leonard clicked to answer and on the screen appeared Howard, Raj and Sheldon.

“Hi Howie!” squeaked Bernadette.

“That’s some beard,” chuckled Leonard.

“Yeah, we decided we needed it for warmth,” said Howard as he pulled on his scraggly beard. Raj nodded as he, too, sported a similarly wild beard.

“So how are things going?” asked Leonard.

“No luck with finding the monopole,” grumped Sheldon. “Perhaps if Howard wasn’t spending so much time with his home-built crossbow.”

Penny frowned. “Howard….”

“But he’s driving us crazy!” the engineer whined.

Sheldon cocked his head. “How am I driving you crazy? I’m merely asking that you try to marshal what powers of concentration you have, limited as they may be, and work to what you consider the ‘best’ of your ability.”

Howard turned to the physicist. “Speaking of marshalling my concentration I think I saw your Kindle outside in the snow. Maybe you should go get it.”

“Oh good grief!” Sheldon darted from the screen.

“Howard J. Wolowitz, promise me you won’t kill Sheldon” scolded Bernadette.

“But—” stammered Howard.

“Promise me!”

“Fine.”

“You too,” Bernadette growled at Raj. The astrophysicist nodded.

“Remember, Sheldon doesn’t filter things he says like most people do,” said Stephanie. “He doesn’t mean to be as insensitive as he is.”

“I suppose,” pouted Howard. “He’s still a douche, though.”

“I found it,” said Sheldon off-screen before he appeared on camera with a scowl on his face that seemed even more ominous with his neatly manicured goatee and moustache. “And FYI it wasn’t outside. I found it in my drawer where I left it last night.”

“Oh, my mistake,” said Howard.

“One can only imagine how many you’ve made thus far,” sighed Sheldon.

“Sheldon, be nice,” warned Penny.

“I’m neither nasty nor nice. I’m merely stating—”

“No stating.”
He pursed his lips. “This makes me wonder if I should tell you the good news.”

“What is it?” asked Amy innocently as if she didn’t know even though Sheldon had discussed it with her at length in a series of emails.

“Well, Amy, I’ve been invited by Dr. Gionet to consult on the neutrino project going on at the SNOlab,” said Sheldon. “At least this means the trip won’t have been for nothing.”

“And it lets us leave Sheldon in the Arctic,” quipped Howard.

“It’s not at the Arctic. It’s in Northern Ontario,” Sheldon amended.

“That’s cool,” said Leonard. “What are you going to be doing?”

“Well they’ve developed an addition to their detector that greatly amplifies the—”

“Sheldon,” Amy interjected. “There’s less than a minute left on the connection and you have more to say, don’t you?” she prompted.

“True,” said Sheldon. “After we finish here I’ll be going to the SNOlab as a consultant. President Siebert has already approved the trip. The benefactor insisted I stay as long as necessary.”

Penny’s heart sank. “How long?”

“Another month at most.”

“Ah.”

Amy cleared her throat. “And?”

“At any rate, Sudbury is merely four and a half hours north of Toronto which, from what I hear, has a Bata Shoe Museum.” There was a pause as Sheldon seemed to gather himself. “I was wondering if perhaps you could join me there once my work’s complete?”

The lanky physicist didn’t specifically say who he was talking to but everyone’s anticipation was on high alert as they looked to Penny.

“I’d love to,” the Nebraskan breathed. “Only I need to know in advance so I can save up for it.”

“I’ve negotiated the price of your ticket and lodging into my expenses. Any shoe shopping is solely on you.”

“Oh sure, give me the hard part,” chuckled Penny.

“I’ll send you an itinerary as soon as possible so you can arrange time away from work.” His eyes caught the computer clock. “We have to go.”

“Love you, Howie,” said Bernadette.

“Love you too,” he replied.

The rest came together with their ‘goodbye’s and ‘good luck’s and a ‘take care MP’ thrown in for good measure.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Penny, only my—”

The screen went black.
Raj looked curiously at Sheldon. “‘MP’?”

The East Texan scowled and walked away.

xTBBTx

A/N: I blended together the two Neutrino labs since there wasn’t as much info on the SNOlab as I’d hoped. Therefore don’t take what I’m saying as gospel because she ain’t! FYI the IceCube Observatory is in the South Pole and SNOlab is in Northern Ontario.

Issfnalgovarchiveotherdfub2094: Magnetic Monopole Searches, Giorgio Giacomelli

Edtunescom: Three States of Matter by Miss Jenny

Wwwphysikrwthaachende: On the Detection of Subrelativistic Magnetic Monopoles With the IceCube Neutrino Observatory.
The Poutine Experience

Reference to and dialogue from: ‘The Agreement Dissection’

Reference to: ‘The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation’;

xTBBTx

If it was possible to still his heart and yet still live Sheldon would have been in that position as he looked at the readings. Since the brief power outage he was worried he lost the incoming data but he didn’t.

What he did do, however, was change the face of physics.

“I did it!” he gasped aloud.

“Did what?” asked Raj as he paused the dvd.

Sheldon turned in the wooden chair to face his companions.

“Gentlemen,” he said excitedly. “I’ve found the monopole.”

“No way!” gushed Raj as both Howard and he dashed to stand beside Sheldon and see the data for themselves.

“It looks as though we got the power back on just in time,” said Howard as he looked at the time stamp. “The monopole made her appearance at oh seven thirty eight this morning.”

“We need to celebrate,” said Raj as he crossed over to the kitchen. “I’ll make some hot cocoa with cream and marshmallows.”

“I have to get an email off to the university,” said Sheldon as he opened his Outlook and began to type.

“Just imagine: I’ll be an honored footnote for the moment our concept of the universe changed,” sighed Raj as he pulled out the can opener and opened the can of cocoa.

“Not changed as much as confirmed,” Sheldon amended as he checked the data and added it to his email. “Leonard scoffed at my twenty six dimensions. Who’s laughing now?”

He went to click ‘send’ and then remembered he should add the constant numbers to make a comparison. As he looked back at the data he glanced at the new readings and his jaw dropped.

“There it is again!” he said excitedly.

“Wow,” said Howard. “Who knew there’d be so many monopoles out there?”

“This is so exciting!” giggled Raj as he opened the can of sweetened condensed milk.

“Perhaps all we needed was the right frequency to look,” mused Sheldon. “That there are so many of them must— Again!”

“Really?” said Howard. He looked at the time stamp. “Interesting.”

“Very much so,” agreed Sheldon. He clicked back to his email.
“Sheldon, you mind if I do an experiment of my own before you send that?” Howard said.

“Well, I don’t know what you could possibly do to make this day any more monumental but alright.”

Howard read over the numbers to confirm his suspicions. Satisfied, he stood back into the center of the room and bowed.

“As Raj knows I have a fascination with magic,” he began.

“Hokum,” replied Sheldon as he turned his chair around.

“Just work with me. One of the earliest tricks was making things appear and disappear. For instance, I can go to Raj’s ear and—voila!” Howard seemingly pulled a quarter from the astrophysicist’s ear.

“You tickle when you do that!” snorted Raj.

“Simple sleight of hand,” scoffed Sheldon.

“A disbeliever, Raj,” tsked Howard. “Well then, I suppose I should make this more scientific to pique his interest.” He flexed and cracked his fingers. “Gentlemen, I shall make a magnetic monopole appear.” He turned to his best friend. “Raj, if you could give me a can. Any can will do.” Raj obliged. Howard then went to Sheldon. “If you’d be so kind as to examine the can to see if it is, in fact, an ordinary can.” Sheldon took the can and checked it. “Is the gentleman satisfied?”

“He is,” agreed Sheldon.

“Alright. Raj, if you’d be so kind as to open the can on my signal,” said Howard as he tossed the can to his friend. He checked his watch. “On my signal. Seven thirty seven and fifty six seconds. Fifty eight. Fifty nine. Now!”

The can opened whirred and then stopped.

Howard stepped forward and gave a deep bow.

“You realize this is two minutes of my life I’ll never get back,” tutted Sheldon.

“Now wait. Like David Blaine my trick isn’t over until the big discovery,” said Howard. “Sheldon, check your readings.”

“I really have no idea what you aim to prove beyond….”

There was another monopole reading.

Sheldon turned wide-eyed to Howard

“How did—” gasped Sheldon. “I mean you….” His mind whirred into overdrive as he recalled Raj opening the can at exactly seven thirty eight. Sheldon checked the time stamp on the new monopole reading.

Seven thirty eight.

“How did you know?” Sheldon asked quietly.

“Two things,” said Howard. “One, I actually read the experiment overview you printed up and
realized that finding a single monopole would be like finding a needle in a haystack during a tornado. So when you found a second one I couldn’t get over the odds of that happening so I thought to myself why now? Why would another one appear? Then the power outage last night came to mind—ahem, that’s my engineering coming to play thank you very much—and so I wanted to check the timestamp on the first reading. Sure enough, it was at breakfast. The last time we used the can opener. My best guess is that we have some kind of short. I’ll grab Jonathan from the next camp and we’ll get it fixed.”

The room was silent.

“So much for my Nobel Prize,” said Sheldon as he clicked to his email and erased it.

“Well you can still write a paper,” grinned Raj. “‘Monopole Fabrication By Way of Electric Can Opener Fluctuations’.” Sheldon snorted.

The lanky man looked to Howard as the engineer slid into his boots and tied them.

“Yes Howard?”

“You’ve managed to do something I never thought you capable of doing had we an infinite number of lifetimes.”

“Sheldon, I might ‘only’ have a Masters degree but I’m good at my job,” Howard frowned.

“I’ve never said you weren’t good at what you did,” replied Sheldon. “What I’m saying is that your trick has me thinking that not all magic is hokum.”

“Believe you Muggle,” the engineer winked before pulling up his hood and venturing outside.

>Penny,

Enclosed as a .pdf you will find an itinerary of my travels in Ontario. Pay particular attention to the Toronto portion as we will be spending a significant amount of time at The Silver Snail.

Bowel movements occurred at 7:55 am and 7:50 pm.

The outside temperature was -20F and we had 18.36 hours of sunlight in which to work.

I haven’t found the monopole. I shall recalibrate the detector tomorrow.

Thirty seven.

Regards, Dr. Sheldon Cooper

Penny’s eyes returned to the number.

“Thirty seven what?” she murmured as she clicked to reply.

Stephanie, Penny, Bernadette and Amy were huddled on the couch with heartfelt expressions on their faces and damp tissues in hand as they watched the final moments of the movie.
Alone in his stuffed chair Leonard stared at the ceiling counting the seconds until the torture ended.

“It’s you,” the romantic lead said to his love interest as she drove off in a cab. The background music changed and Leonard knew by the sound and the ‘awwws’ and snifflers that the women were in nirvana. He closed his eyes and continued singing the Adam West Bat-Man song in his head.

The credits began to roll and Penny gave a loud sniffler.

“That was so sad,” she sighed.

Stephanie blew her nose. “I know.”

And yet so romantic, gushed Bernadette as she wiped her eyes.

“This might even trump Madame Curie and her husband for best love story,” agreed Amy wistfully. She turned to Leonard. “What do you think?”

Four sets of eyes were on him.

“It was…. Well, you know how it was. I mean you saw it.” Leonard gestured at the tv. “It was what we saw and what we saw was so positively—”

“Baffling with bullshit, bub,” snorted Penny.

“No, what’s baffling is why she went after him even after he blows her off,” said Leonard. “I mean it’s obvious he didn’t want her and yet at the end I’m supposed to believe that he does?”

“Because he did want her,” sniffled Bernadette. “He just didn’t know how to say he did.”

Leonard smirked at his girlfriend. “So I can treat you badly and ignore you and you’d be cool with that?”

“I dunno if she’d be cool but you’d definitely be cold,” said Amy. “Once the heart stops the body cools rather rapidly.”

“Well, I’ve gotta get me off to bed if I’m gonna make that audition tomorrow,” said Penny as she stood.

“And check her email before bed,” teased Bernadette.

“OooOOoOoo,” went the three women, causing Penny to roll her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. ‘Night guys,” she grinned and exited the apartment.

As soon as she closed her door Penny bee-lined to her computer and logged on. It was a luxury having a password that didn’t change from week to week.

She clicked to her inbox and there it was:

‘Penny,

Bowel movements occurred at 7:55 am and 7:50 pm.

The outside temperature was -21F and we had 18.37 hours of sunlight in which to work.
I haven’t found the monopole. I shall recalibrate the detector tomorrow.

To answer your question, the number indicates how many days until you are in Toronto.

Just so you’ll know.

Thirty six.

Regards, Dr. Sheldon Cooper'

xTBBTx

Sheldon finished packing his duffle bag and tied the end closed.

“Gentlemen, we have forty five minutes until the plane arrives,” he said as he stared at Howard with a bit of a frown. “Howard, chop chop.”

“Just a minute,” mumbled the engineer as he continued working on whatever it was at the kitchen counter.

Sheldon came over to see what had his friend’s—although he’d never publically admit to it, Howard’s actions had him replace Leonard as the tertiary friend behind Penny and Amy—attention.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Howard held up a large bear claw.

“I’m piercing a hole through this so I can make it into a necklace for Bernie. You know, to remember the trip.”

“But we never encountered a polar bear.”

“No,” agreed Howard as he changed the bit on the micro-drill. “But we saw some. Besides the claw came from an Inuit guide and you can’t get much more ‘north’ than that.”

“I suppose,” mused Sheldon. “Although I’m puzzled as to why you’d want to give the claw to Bernadette when you are the one who went to the Pole.”

“I think it’s romantic,” gushed Raj as he folded his long underwear and packed it in his duffle bag.

“How is the gift of a claw from a fifteen hundred pound carnivore in any way ‘romantic’?” asked Sheldon. “It’s not like Howard defended his life against one.”

Howard gave the drill a steady pulse and made the hole before turning it off.

“Think of it this way,” said Raj. “We’re at a spot in the world where most people will never see. And even though we drove each other nuts I still have to say I don’t regret coming.” He smiled through his grizzled beard. “We’ve been in a magic land and all Howard wants to do is give Bernadette a taste of that magic.”

“I see,” nodded Sheldon.

He walked to the porthole window and looked outside at the white landscape beyond.

xTBBTx
The gang sans Sheldon sat in the living room at 4A chatting away after eating. Priya, Raj’s sister, happened to be in town on business and so dropped in to see her brother after his trip to the Great White North.

“To non-reconstituted food!” toasted Howard before Raj and he clinked beer bottles.

“It’s the little things,” agreed Raj as he reclined against the side of the couch. He looked to Leonard. “By the way, I like what you’ve done with the place. The accent pillows make the couch ‘pop’ and that heavenly smell—wintergreen pot pourrie?”

“Rose petals and wintergreen,” grinned Stephanie as she took a sip of wine in Leonard’s stuffed chair.

Raj wiggled his eyebrows. “I happen to make my own.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes,” his sister Priya said with a crooked smile. “Mother assumed he was going into flower arranging. Then when he found Howard we thought it was destiny like Haroun and Tanweer.”

“We’re not like Haroun and Tanweer!” Raj said adamantly with a blush.

“Well as long as Leonard gets the place back to the lemony freshness of Mr. Clean before Sheldon gets home all will be well,” soothed Howard.

“Leonard could always come live with me,” offered Stephanie, causing Leonard to choke on his water. “You okay, honey?” She rubbed his back as he leaned forward in his computer chair.

“Yeah,” he gasped. “Not that it wouldn’t be a good thing moving in, you know, together. It’s just that this place is close to the university.” He grasped at straws. “Besides it’d be murder getting out the Roommate Agreement.”

“What’s that?” asked Priya.

“A formal document Sheldon wrote up outlining the rights and responsibilities of roommatehood.”

“Yeah he made me one for friendship, too,” agreed Penny.

Priya was intrigued. “Now those I’d love to see.”

Leonard went to his desk drawer and pulled out the Agreement.

“It’s quite technical,” he said as he handed it to her.

“Leonard, she’s a lawyer,” tutted Raj.

“Actually, it’s quite vague,” said Priya as she flipped through the pages.

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Seventy three pages is ‘vague’?”

“It’s not specific enough,” explained Priya. “For instance, section seven on the right to enter the bathroom in emergency situations is not specific as to what constitutes an emergency.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious what he means?”

“If you were late for work and remembered that your mascara was in the bathroom, would you call that an emergency and slip in while Sheldon was showering to grab it?”
“I guess.”

“The legal principle is ambiguity in a contract benefits the party that did not draft it.” She handed the Agreement to an awestruck Leonard. “In this case, Leonard.”

“How much would it cost to have you go over the Agreement?” he said excitedly.

Priya grinned. “Well, you can pay for my dinner for starters.”

Sheldon exited the hotel washroom in his blue plaid housecoat and pajamas and went to his bed. He moved the pillow to the headboard and settled himself in an upright position. Placing his laptop on his thighs he made to open it but instead veritably slumped against his pillow and closed his eyes. He was positively exhausted. After three months in the Arctic and the late nights at the SNOlab in Sudbury his body was on the verge of collapse. And for what?

He didn’t find the magnetic monopole.

His Nobel Prize still eluded him.

Penny wasn’t here.

“At least one of these is rectified shortly,” he mumbled as he opened his laptop. Stifling a yawn he logged onto the free wifi and checked his email.

'Subject: All ready Sarge!
Hey there!
Everything’s set. Got the tickets and Amy is gonna drive me to the airport.

I read up on the Bata Museum. I am gonna walk your ass off in there! So many shoes. So little time.

Oh, btw I read up on your ‘Silver Snail’. You’re dragging me to Canada so we can go to a comic shop? That deserves at least one pair of shoes as compensation! ;)

See you soon! XXX P'

Sheldon’s eyes lingered on the three X’s. In baseball it would indicate that he had struck out but that seemed unlikely in this instance. After all they weren’t playing a game. At least he wasn’t at any rate. That Penny agreed to join him meant that at worst she found his company agreeable, but platonic.

The physicist couldn’t dispute that he missed her. At times he found himself thinking about the incomplete door knocks. Her annoying high-pitched laugh. The way she called him ‘sweetie’ and sang ‘Soft Kitty’.

Sheldon still didn’t know if he ‘liked’ her.

He just knew that he wanted her here.

Penny, he typed.

'Bowel movements occurred at 7:55 am and 7:50 pm….'
“So have you ever been to Toronto before?” asked Bernadette as Amy and she sat on Penny’s bed watching the waitress pack her suitcase.

“Never been to Canada, period,” replied Penny.

“They’re a friendly bunch,” said Amy. “Although they do have a rather unhealthy obsession with Tim Hortons.”

“What’s that?”

“A hot beverage establishment. A colleague of mine had cans of their coffee shipped to her.” Amy cocked her head. “And had a weird habit of saying ‘roll up the rim to win’.”

“I’ll have to try it,” said Penny as she folded her pajamas and tucked them in the suitcase. “I’ve looked up stuff and besides the shoe museum I wanna hit Kensington Market and Queen Street.”

“You’ve added them to the itinerary?”

Penny snorted. “You better believe it. No way Dr. Protocol is gonna stand between me and vintage clothing shops.” She went to her closet and pulled out a couple of tops. “Man, I can’t wait to go.”

“You mean you can’t wait to see Toronto or can’t wait to see Sheldon?” Bernadette asked slyly.

Penny turned to her friend with a blush on her face.

“OoooOo,” said Bernadette and Amy.

“Yeah, whatever,” Penny said and packed her tops.

“So do you think Sheldon missed you?” asked Bernadette.

“I think so. He kept track of the days until I get there.”

“OooOo.”

“Of course he also let me know about his bowel movements so take that as you will,” chuckled Penny as she went to her drawer for socks.

“He was relating intimate details,” said Amy.

“Yeah well there’s intimate and then just gross.”

“He must be a delight when he’s sick,” Bernadette smirked.

Penny made a face. “Yeah he was constantly telling me what color his boogers were.”

Amy nodded. “Color often indicates—”

“Gross Amy.”

“It’s only biology, Penny.”

Penny’s phone rang. “Yeah well there’s a difference finding ‘biology’ in a Petrie dish and another hoarded into a Kleenex.” She answered. “Hello?”
“Hello,” said Sheldon and Penny instantly knew that something was wrong.

“What’s up?”

“Things are not going according to plan. The last phase of the experiment I’m working on won’t finish until Saturday morning.”

“That sucks.”

“Indeed. As you’ll be in Toronto Thursday I thought I’d send you some links for local attractions.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll find something to pass the time. You sure you still want to do this? I mean I can get a refund—”

“Penny, we planned this. You booked time off work and I want to see…Toronto.”

Penny grinned. “Yeah. I wanna see Toronto too. Okay, I’ll text ya when I get there. Good luck with your experiment thingie.”

“There’s no such thing as luck. Goodnight, Penny.”

“Bye.” Penny hung up and she sighed.

“Problems?” asked Amy.

“His experiment ran over so he won’t be free until Saturday. That means I’ll be by myself for a day.”

“Unless you surprise him,” offered Amy.

“What do you mean?”

Amy pulled out her phone. “Rent a car and go up. It’s only four and a half hours to Sudbury from Toronto.”

Penny grinned. “Sounds like a plan. Only I don’t know where he’s staying.”

“Not a problem. He logged his itinerary on his Facebook page.” Amy scrolled. “And we have an address.”

“Okay, no telling him I’m coming,” said Penny. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“He’ll still be busy with work,” Bernadette reminded her.

“I know. It’s just that…. Penny pumpkin grinned.

“OOoooOOoo,” all three women cooed before laughing.

xTBBTx

“Man, these roads are crap,” mumbled Penny as did her best to avoid the pot holes. It might be a rental car with ‘walk-away’ insurance but she still didn’t want the hassle of getting another vehicle when time was tight.

The highway signs indicated a drop in speed as Sudbury came into view. From what she read on
the sign its population was around one hundred and fifty thousand and from the bilingual ‘Welcome’ sign the population also spoke French.

The GPS made a beep signaling a direction change and Penny turned onto a main thoroughfare and made her way downtown. It was just after dinnertime so she hoped that Sheldon would be in his room. One nice thing about an anal retentive neighbor was that she could pin down his routine. At home ten o’clock was bedtime so there was no doubt he’d try to adhere to that.

She again turned at a roadway to the hospital, science center and university and found the hotel. After finding a spot in the parking lot she took out her suitcase and wheeled it to the lobby.

“Hello,” said the concierge amiably.

“Hi,” Penny smiled. “I’m looking for Dr. Sheldon Cooper’s room.”

Immediately the young man’s face scrunches into a frown.

“Dr. Cooper’s in room nine,” he said flatly. “Although from what I’ve learned he doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be quiet,” winked Penny.

“Please do. Otherwise I’ll hear about it in the morning.”

Penny again smiled, although this one was more strained, and made her way down the hall.

“Definitely the right place,” she said to herself as the smell of ‘clean’ came to the forefront as she arrived at room nine. Before she knocked she felt a moment of unease as she rethought the plan. Sheldon didn’t do well with surprises. He might be royally pissed at this idea.

“Ah well, too late now,” she shrugged and knocked out her incomplete ‘shave and a haircut’.

There was a pause before two knocks were heard on the other side and the door opened to reveal her neighbor in his robot evolution t-shirt, blue thermal and khaki pants.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Penny cocked her head. “Why Penny! How nice to see you! Please, come in!”

Sheldon paused before giving a slight nod and stood back to let her enter.

Immediately Penny was inundated with the familiar smell of Lysol lemon antibacterial cleanser as she wheeled her suitcase into the room.

“So,” she said as she turned to him and opened her arms wide.

“You’re going to maul me again, aren’t you?” he said with a slight smirk.

“Non optional, Sheldon.”

She waved him in with her hands and to her surprise he obliged although he was stroke stiff and his arms remained at his sides. Penny took in the smell of talc as she lay her cheek against his chest and squeezed.

“God, I missed you,” she sighed before leaning back to regard her friend.

“Oh,” said Sheldon after a moment. “You require a reciprocation of sentiment.” His eyes took in
the top of her head, reacquainting himself with the strands of Penny’s blonde locks. “Your absence was noted as it was abnormally quiet.”

Penny chuckled. “Man, you’re a sentimental slob.” She released him and sat on the bed. “So how are things going? You almost finished?”

“We’re working in double shifts to get the project completed,” said the physicist. “I’ve already made it clear that Saturday morning is as late as I can stay.”

“Okay.”

“I should be back about four thirty in the morning.” He checked his watch. “Speaking of which I have to be downstairs shortly for my ride to the lab.”

“That’s cool.”

“I’m not sure what there is to do in Sudbury. Aside from a capable comic book store I can’t really say it offers much, hence the reason why I suggested staying in Toronto.”

“No biggie. I’ll watch tv or something.”

“Very well.” Sheldon slung his messenger bag across his body and took up his laptop bag. “I’ll see about procuring you a room.”

“Don’t do that. I’ll stay here.”

Sheldon blanched. “You can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“It’s my room.”

“Nice try,” smirked Penny. “Your room’s in Pasadena. This is a hotel room.”

“But there’s only one bed.”

“We’ll do it in shifts. I’ll sleep there until you get home.”

“But this is my bed. Your germs would be on my sheets and that’s unacceptable.”

“Fine. I’ll sleep on the floor. No biggie.”

Sheldon sighed. “Very well. I sleep until noon. Do not disturb me until then.”

“You got it, boss.”

He went to the door and paused.

“Don’t let me sleep past noon. It’ll give us time to ‘hang out’ until I have to go back to work.”

Penny smiled. “No problem.”

“You know I’ve had four chaos-free months and in a span of an incomplete door knock you’ve turned my life upside down.”

“You’re welcome,” she said sweetly.
Sheldon snorted and exited the room.

XxX

Sheldon turned the lock and entered his room to the sound of Penny’s snoring.

“Good Lord,” he murmured.

He made note of where Penny was sleeping before closing the door and tentatively stepped his way to his bedside and turned on the lamp.

“Sheldon?” Penny said groggily.

“Yes. Go back to sleep,” he said softly.

“‘Kay.” She turned over and did just that.

Sheldon took his pajamas into the washroom and changed before completing his nighttime ritual. When he opened the door his eyes caught the awkward way in which Penny was sleeping. How her hair crossed her cheek.

Leaving two towels for himself he took the rest of the rolls and went to her side. Gently he tucked them here and there to give her proper support. It wasn’t the best but it was the best he could do at the moment short of transferring her to his bed and that was just madness.

He turned off the bathroom light and went to bed. As he lay between the sheets Penny’s soft snoring began and he let out a little sigh.

“Even asleep she’s still annoying,” he murmured.

He closed his eyes and slept.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon.”

Silence.

Penny smiled at his sleeping form, all Dracula-like with a sleep mask. God, does he ever relax?

“Sheldon,” she tried again.

“Danger! Danger!” cried Sheldon as he sudden sprang to a sitting position.

“Whoa! Relax!” she soothed as he took off his sleep mask.

“What are you doing?” he said groggily.

“You said wake you at noon. Well it’s noon.”

“No it’s not. He checked the time on the clock. It’s eleven fifty seven.”

“This isn’t one of those anal things again, is it?” smirked Penny before retreating to a chair and sat.

“I’m precise,” sniffed Sheldon before lying back in bed.

“So you’re just going to lie there for three minutes?”
“It’s not twelve o’clock.” He closed his eyes and took a breath. “I’d like to remind you that this isn’t ‘Anything Can Happen Thursday’. I have a routine to follow and—” He let out a gasp as he felt something streak up the sole of his foot. “Penny!”

“Sorry. Just checking for the switch.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Contrary to popular opinion I am an organic life form.”

“Not that you’re happy about that.”

“Not particularly, no, but I am a realist.” He turned to his clock. Eleven fifty eight.

Penny caught his movement and she glanced at the clock. With a shake of the head she moved to the side of the bed and grabbed a hold of his blankets.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just getting ready,” she said innocently.

“Penny, I’m more than capable of getting out of bed myself,” Sheldon tutted.

“Call it a perk of having a roommate.”

“Leonard doesn’t wake me up.”

“That’s because he’s chicken.”

They turned to the clock. Eleven fifty nine.

“Remind me to get you a room for tonight,” said Sheldon as he took up his own grip on the blankets.

“Don’t you dare waste your money,” frowned Penny. “We’re checking out tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, but your behavior leaves me no other choice.”

“Sure it does,” said Penny as she glanced at the clock. “Ya just gotta suck it up.”

Twelve o’clock.

In one motion Penny threw back the blankets even as Sheldon did his best to remain covered.

“Good morning, good mOrning,” sang Penny intentionally off-key as they struggled.

“Penny, I have to stretch,” Sheldon chided.

“You’re stretching now.”

“No, I’m being accosted,” he growled as he yanked his legs to a fetal position as Penny flipped the ends of the blankets over in search of his feet.

“Ah, it’s good for your cardio,” she giggled. She reached up the blanket. “Here piggy, wiggy.”

“Actually the largest percentage of heart attacks occurs in the morning.” Realizing he was in a losing battle he tossed away the rest of the blankets. “There! I’m awake and alert!” he twanged.

“About time,” snorted Penny. “Look, it’s twelve oh two already.” She gave a pumpkin grin to
counter his glare. “I’ll be in the lounge while you get ready.”

“Familiarize yourself with it. You may be sleeping there tonight.”

Penny chuckled. “Anyone ever tell you you’re a grump in the morning?” She grabbed her purse. “Now go make yourself beautiful and I’ll see ya down there.”

Sheldon waited for the door to close before he got up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Obviously he didn’t need to do a vocal test or stretch.

It felt weird. Incomplete.

He cleared his throat and began to wiggle his shoulders.

“Vocal test. Morning vocal test.”

Sheldon glanced at the clock. Twelve oh four. He still had to shower and wash up. His bowel movement wouldn’t be for another twenty five minutes. He still needed to eat breakfast.

Penny was downstairs.

They had four hours and twenty six minutes until he went back to work.

“Second vocal test,” he said as he marched into the bathroom and closed the door.

Penny’s eyes brightened as she saw all of the tropical trees and plants in a brightly lit area.

“Butterflies,” she cooed.

“We have butterflies in California,” replied Sheldon.

“Look, this was your idea to do this Science North tour.” She put on a smug smile. “I’m your guest and as such you have to humor me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No, you’re an uninvited intruder who’s taken half of my hotel room.”

“Oh quit being a fuddy-duddy.” She noted some children enter the exhibit. “Hey, you can go into the butterfly room!”

“I’ll wait here.”

“Nice try.” She grabbed his wrist and dragged him into the exhibit.

“Penny, I didn’t take my allergy pill this morning. Who knows what plants I could be allergic to,” he protested.

“I’ll risk it,” she chuckled.

Sheldon let her move him into the center of the room before he tugged his wrist away from her grip. Penny turned and winked at him before going over to the foliage to see the butterflies. He noted how easily she interacted with people as she chatted with a parent before beginning a game of spot the butterfly with a five year old girl.

People gravitated to Penny whereas all Sheldon ever felt from others was an urgency to leave his presence.
And yet Penny was here with him.

“Sheldon, come over here,” Penny called.

“I can see them from here,” he replied.

Just then a little boy stepped into the foliage and shook some leaves startling dozens of butterflies. Everyone ‘ooohed and ‘ah’ed as they took to the air and scattered.

Sheldon ducked his head as the cloud went by but a few of the butterflies nevertheless sought refuge on the lanky physicist.

“Sheldon, smile,” Penny said and he turned to see her with phone in hand.

He let her take her picture before he shook his arms and waved his hands over his head.

Penny checked the photo and grinned. Covered in butterflies Sheldon still managed to pull off one of his patented Cooper scowls.

“Perfect,” she said lightly as the pair exited the exhibit.

“So you say,” he grumbled. “I’m covered in Lepidoptera germs.”

“I don’t think there’s been a case of butterfly-to-man infection.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t be the first.”

Penny snorted. “Well I’ll let you know if you sprout wings.”

“More likely than not my skin cells will secrete a sticky substance that will form a chrysalis so my digestive enzymes can digest my body and reshape it into a demi-human,” Sheldon said evenly as the pair ascended a large spiral staircase that wound itself around the skeleton of a blue whale.

“You know, that has to be one of the grossest things I’ve ever heard,” Penny said as she made a face.

“Biology is rarely pretty,” he agreed. “How Amy and Bernadette can get excited over slimy things I’ll never know.”

They came up to a floor with a wide variety of mechanical exhibits.

“Excellent. The physics floor,” Sheldon said with a smile. “Granted the experiments are unsophisticated but the basic principles are there. I’m sure even someone with a tenuous grasp of science like yourself could get the gist.”

“Being as asshat again,” she warned with a smile on her face and a sparkle to her eyes.

“How am I being rude? I’m merely saying that— Look.” He walked over to a machine with two disks, one on top of the other, with a buzzer on top. “Now spin the buzzer around the disk and listen.”

Penny did so.

“And?” she asked.

“Penny focus. Listen to how the sound waves change as it moves.”
She spun it again.

“Okay, it gets quiet the farther away it is from me and louder as it gets closer,” she said.

“The Doppler Effect,” Sheldon said. “What you’re hearing is the stretching and compression of sound waves.” He turned to her. “nneeEERRroo.”

Penny laughed. “So the question to the Jeopardy answer of the Doppler Effect is ‘What is nneeEERRroo?’”

“Exactly,” nodded Sheldon.

“Fascinating.”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s fascinating but it is at least noteworthy.”

Penny’s eye caught what looked like a giant ball made of bars in the distance with a man strapped in the middle spinning away.

“Now that’s my kinda physics!” she cooed and walked towards it.

“It’s a gyroscope,” said Sheldon as he increased his pace to catch up. “It simulates the gyroscopic forces astronauts must face when training to control tumbling spacecraft.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re going on it,” Penny said cheerily.

“Oh yay,” Sheldon muttered under his breath.

XxX

It was prevening as Sheldon and Penny walked outside the science center along the boardwalk that circled Ramsey Lake.

“I can’t believe you ate that,” Sheldon said distastefully.

“Poutine rocks,” Penny grinned. “French fries and cheese curds with gravy on top.” She nudged his arm. “Besides, I’m a tourist; I have to sample the local cuisine.”

“Well I’m glad we’re not in Mexico where they eat escamoles, the larvae of the—”

“That’s okay!” Penny said quickly. “I’ll stick to poutine.”

He shook his head. “Poutine could be part of the reason why Sudbury’s cardiac rate is so high.”

Penny shook her head in amusement as they walked. Although it was cool, Spring was most definitely in the air as various trees were budding.

“Neat that they have pussy willows here, too,” Penny said. “Mom cuts some branches for the kitchen table. I used to pet the little fuzzies.”

“Salix discolor. Indigenous to Canada and the Northern States.”

“So none in Galveston?”

“We’re known for tree sculptures carved from tree trunks. They’re all over the place.”

“Carved like what?”
“Dolphins, dalmations, mermaids, angels. Any subject, really.”

“Sounds cool.”

“I suppose.”

“What I remember the most growing up was the annual fall fair,” mused Penny. “All the animals and rides and yummy food.”

“Mother would drag us off to amusement parks when we were children.” Sheldon looked out across the lake. “Meemaw and Pop-Pop came with us the year before he….” Pause. “Missy wanted to go on rides and whatnot but all I wanted to do was go home. I’d just found the periodic table of the elements and I spent my time pouring over it and then going through the house finding as many elements as I could.” Pause. “Mother was about to paddle me for not going on the spinning cups with Missy when Pop-Pop took my hand. ‘We’re goin’ tuh get some helium,’ he said. I was excited and happily babbled to him helium’s properties as we walked.”

Penny turned her head to look at her friend. Sheldon’s tone was even-keeled but she could feel the intimacy of the moment.

“He bought two helium balloons. He tied one to my wrist and we went to a bench and sat.” Pause. “I thought the other balloon was for Missy but instead Pop-Pop untied it and inhaled a good gulp of helium and then spoke to me. He offered me the balloon and I inhaled and talked.”

“Sounds awesome,” Penny said softly. She could imagine little Shelly and his grandfather talking and laughing on a bench while the rest of the world went by. No wonder Pop-Pop was so important to Sheldon. Penny bet that the older man was probably the first person Sheldon ever connected with where it counted. Someone who understood him.

Penny heard him take a deep breath and she moved over and lightly nudged his arm with her own. Almost immediately Sheldon straightened and cleared his throat.

“The North Pole is four thousand eight hundred and forty eight kilometers from here,” he said with a bit of a twang. “The SNOlab has a permanent team on Ellesmere Island which is eight hundred miles south of the magnetic North Pole.”

Penny put out a hand to stop him.

“You’re not saying you want to stay here,” she said in what she hoped was a steady voice.

“Good Lord, no,” he said adamantly. “I was just commenting on how close we are to the Pole.”

“Don’t scare me like that,” Penny said, relieved.

“Still, it was quite beautiful up there. Quiet.” He snorted. “And colder than a witch’s tit as my father would say.”

They resumed walking.

“You better have a ton of pictures,” said Penny.

“I have enough,” agreed Sheldon. “However pictures don’t quite capture its essence.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a clear block and handed it to Penny. “This does.”

“What is it?” she asked as she held it up to get a better look. At the very center she could see a small crystallized form.
“A snowflake from the North Pole preserved in a one percent solution of polyvinyl acetal resin.” Penny was floored. “It’s beautiful,” she said softly. “Thank you. Thanks for everything.”

“‘Everything’ is rather vast. I merely gave you a snowflake not given birth to you,” he tutted.

“No, but you brought me here.”

“Actually you came here yourself.” Penny stuck out her tongue. “Quaint,” he said with a smirk. He glanced at the ground before his eyes flicked to her face. “This afternoon has been f-u-n.” Blue eyes met green. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Penny beamed. “Couldn’t imagine being anywhere else, Dr. C.”

He nodded and then checked his watch.

“We have to head back if I’m to make it to work on time,” he said.

“I can drive you,” she said quickly and blushed as he stared curiously at her. “You know, if you want.”

“That would be acceptable.”

The pair turned around and began their walk back to shore.

XxX

The car went past a gate and Penny followed the road until it came to a large building. She pulled in front and turned to her passenger.

“So this is the infamous SNOlab?” she asked.

“No, SNOlab’s two kilometers beneath the surface in what was the Creighton Mine,” replied Sheldon as he undid his seatbelt.

“Wow. Why down there?”

“Some experiments require great depths to reduce cosmogenic backgrounds to acceptable levels.” He saw her blank look. “They’re trying to look for a specific station on the radio and are doing their best to eliminate the static.” He got out of the car and opened the rear door.

“Oh, okay.” She smirked. “They should have put that in the tour book.”

Sheldon regarded her over the seat. “They don’t offer tours. Unless you’re suggesting you want one?”

Penny shrugged. “I doubt I’d understand it. Besides, you’ve got work to do.”

“I didn’t bring you to the Arctic; the very least I can do is introduce you to the universe.”

“What the heck.” She put the car in gear and parked in the visitor lot before returning to Sheldon.

“Of course what you see here remains here,” he warned her as they neared the building.

“I doubt I’d be able to explain what I’m seeing even if I was being tortured,” Penny chuckled.

“Good.” He opened the door. “Dr. Gionet and I are working on building a slow moving
monopole detector. My equipment was not sensitive enough and this should rectify the problem.” He pulled out a card and swiped the sensor before opening the door.

“Shouldn’t I sign in or something?”

“Penny, this is a neutrino lab not a nuclear facility. Besides, you’re not going into the lab proper.”

They walked down a long corridor.

“Okay, so why are you looking for these monopoles?” asked Penny.

“James Clerk Maxwell formulated his famous four equations describing electromagnetism. His equations are ‘asymmetrical’—electricity has an electron monopole and a proton monopole, each with opposite charge, but magnetism does not. Pierre Curie hypothesized that magnetic monopoles might exist but it was Paul Dirac who provided the real mathematical heft for the idea. He showed that if one quantized electric charges, then the existence of monopoles was consistent with Maxwell’s equations. In other words, monopoles could exist at the ends of long tubes carrying magnetic fields called ‘Dirac strings’.”

Penny snorted. “Well I’m glad that clears things up. Bazinga.”

Sheldon again used his swipe card and they entered a lab with an assortment of weird equipment. It reminded Penny of Leonard’s lab except for the boards of math doodles and diagrams posted all over the place. It all looked rather chaotic to her but Sheldon seemed to maneuver himself quite freely through it all and so she followed.

“My area of interest is string theory, and string theory also predicts the existence of magnetic monopoles,” Sheldon explained. “If we find a monopole it would provide a key piece of experimental evidence to support string theory for a Grand Unified Theory meshing general relativity with quantum mechanics.”

“So it’d make all your math real.”

“My ‘math’ is real,” he asserted. “But yeah.”

“Cool.”

The door opened and a man in his mid-thirties sporting a goatee and moustache entered.

“Well this is a surprise,” he said and smiled. “You didn’t tell me this was a take your wife to work day. Marc Gionet.”

“Penny isn’t my wife, she’s my friend,” amended Sheldon. “Since she’s being gracious enough to give up a day of sightseeing in Toronto to be here I thought why not show her what’s taken up my attention.”

“I see,” said Marc. “So what do you think?”

“To be honest I don’t know what to think,” admitted Penny. “I mean I’m just stunned that there’s a whole building built to find monopoles and yet I never heard of them before now.”

“Magnetic monopoles, and no, we’re just a little lab squared away in a little corner of this facility. SNOlab’s bread and butter are neutrinos and the search for dark matter. Now that Dr. Underhill found the first evidence for it we know where to hone our search.”

Penny looked to Sheldon. “He means Dave Underhill?”
“Yes,” Sheldon said with a tight jaw.

“Wow.”

“It was luck,” Sheldon sniffed. “He happened to be looking at a particular spot on a gigantic photo and voila—dark matter. I could replicate his ‘science’ by tossing a dart at a picture of a group of galaxies.”

“Well I can see this is more than a stab in the dark,” Penny said diplomatically.

“It employs Cherenkov radiation,” said Sheldon as he went to the board and drew a circle.

“It’s okay Sheldon, you don’t have to explain it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “So you know what Cherenkov radiation is?”

(Of course not.)

“Then I need to explain.” He continued to draw. “Now this small dot is a direct neutrino which we’ll call ‘A’.”

Penny looked helplessly at Marc who grinned even as he shrugged his shoulders.

XxX

Penny unlocked the door and entered the hotel room. All the way back to the hotel her mind went over what she learned at the SNOlab. Granted a lot of parts were as boring as her science classes at high school but what she did get from all of it was the difference between Sheldon and her. As much as she teased him about not going out and living life she realized that he could equally tease her about not knowing life. What they were doing at the lab was more than she’d ever done in her life.

She slipped off her shoes and refreshed herself in the washroom before changing into her pajamas. As she went to the bed she noticed fresh bedding on the pillow and a note on top in Sheldon’s hand:

’Penny,

You may use the bed with the understanding that I will return at 4:30am at which time you will rise and we’ll change the bedding.

Regards, Dr. Sheldon Cooper’

Penny chuckled as she moved the bedding to a side table and snuggled into bed to watch tv.

XxX

Sheldon quietly slipped into the hotel room and turned on the bedside lamp.

“Penny, I’m back,” he said as he took out a fresh pair of pajamas from the drawer and went into the washroom for his shower. After he was clean, dry and dressed he finished his bedtime routine and returned to the main room and Penny’s light snoring.

“Penny,” he said again. “It’s nearly five and I’d like to go to bed.”

“Kay,” Penny mumbled and rolled over to make room for him and returned to sleep.
The physicist pursed his lips and pondered his predicament before taking up the clean bedding and lay the bottom sheet on the floor beside the bed. He went to the washroom and retrieved some fresh towels and rolled them up before turning off the light and settling himself on the floor.

xTBBTx

Snolabca: About SNOlab

Newsdiscoverycom: On the Trail of Magnetic Monopoles

Physikrwthaachen: On the Detection of Subrelativistic Magnetic Monopoles with the IceCube Neutrino Observatory
"Don't know how you do the voodoo that you do," sang Penny as she drove. "So well it's a spell, hell, makes me wanna shoop shoop shoop shoop."

"Shop, shop shop," amended Sheldon as he turned to face her. "If you're going to torture me with song at least have the grammar correct."

Penny pumpkin grinned.

"Shoop shoop ba-doop, shoop ba-doop, shoop ba-doop ba-doop badoop."

Sheldon shook his head disgustedly and fixed his gaze out the side window.

"Sorry, Sheldon," Penny burbled. "Just excited is all."

"Your enthusiasm is noted. Not appreciated at present but noted all the same."

"Ah, so you're saying that my enthusiasm is appreciated some times." She took a sip of her Tim Hortons coffee. It was essentially a blonde blend but damn it was good.

"It could be taken as that," he conceded.

"I think it's the only way to take that." She turned to regard her companion as he was all but slumped in his car seat looking out the window. "Sweetie, you wanna take a nap or something?"

"Sleeping on the floor isn't conducive to having good night's rest." He turned his head towards her. "You didn't get out of bed."

"You could of just shoved me out."

"I'll remember that should the occasion recur."

"Why Sheldon, are you saying you could see me in your bed?" Penny teased.

"It's a point of logic. I tell you not to sleep in my bed. You don't listen to what I say. Ergo, there's a possibility I'll one day return from a night of Halo at Koothrappali's to find you, Ms. Goldilocks, nestled in my bed."

"Hard to argue with logic," chuckled Penny.

"Indeed." He stifled a yawn with the back of his hand. "I believe a constitutional is needed." Here Sheldon narrowed his eyes. "No radio and for pity's sake no singing."

"I could always whistle."

He cupped his hands over his ears. "No whistling!"

"Joke, Sheldon, joke! Geez." He removed his hands from the sides of his head. "Not a fan of whistling are ya?"
"It irritates me."

"Ya don't say. Well chum, mum's the word so get some shuteye."

"Wake me when we're nearing Toronto."

"Sure thing, boss. Night night."

"Penny, it's not nighttime."

"Close your eyes and shut your hole before I start singing lullabies," she warned. He obliged and in a few minutes Sheldon was out.

The drive was pleasant as Penny took in the trees, rocks and rivers. From time to time she'd pass a farmer's field and she felt a little tug at her heartstrings. No matter how much she wanted to get away from the farm there was a part of her that would always be Nebraska born and raised.

Outside of a movie shoot she never thought she'd end up in Canada and yet here she was, traveling with the strangest man she'd ever met. There was a part of her that wondered why she was here. Sheldon was her friend but-- Here Penny frowned. He was her friend and she thought she wanted more and more importantly believed that he wanted more. The only question was could there be more? Sheldon was so different from her: he was socially awkward, never telling Penny anything concrete about how he felt.

*I'm glad you're here.*

Nor could she ever consider him 'romantic'.

*Her eyes widened as she took in the pressed snowflake.*

"He probably didn't get what it meant," she muttered and then immediately cursed herself. *Don't be like everyone else.* Sheldon got a lot more than people gave him credit for. He felt, as could be seen with M.O.N.T.E. and he did take a punch in the nose for her. As much as Sheldon was a thinker he was also a doer when it counted.

He never said he liked her romantically.

"But he never said he didn't," she smirked.

The question was whether they should go ahead with their relationship progression.

Sheldon would see it as some kind of experiment.

Penny flew by the seat of her pants.

They'd inevitably drive each other crazy. *But until then it'd be kinda fun.*

Justin's warning flashed into her head:

*“Be sure you want this 'cause you’ll fuck him up if you don’t.”*

To give out a Sheldonism Penny knew that she didn't want this. She snickered. Hanging out with Sheldon had her overthinking things. It was simple: Sheldon and she liked each other and if it's meant to be, it'll be. If not, being friends wasn't anything to frown at. It was a no lose situation.

"I hope," said Penny as she bit her lip.
"We should have driven here," tsked Sheldon as Penny and he got off the streetcar.

"Sheldon, ya really get to know a city through its transit," she replied.

"Perhaps, but you also increase the chances of catching an illness from tactile or airborne contamination." He pulled out some antibacterial cleaner from his pocket and squeezed a drop on his hands. "Who knows what bacteria Canadians harbor? Your hand." Penny obliged and he squeezed some cleanser on her palm.

"You're just sore because you're not wearing bus pants," she chuckled as she rubbed her hands.

Sheldon pulled out his phone and checked the address for the comic shop. "A point of contention, yes, but a surgical mask would be preferable since I didn't have a travel briefing with my doctor before venturing into a heavily populated area."

"We live outside of L.A.! How much more populated can ya get?"

"Well, Mexico City has a population of--"

"We're not in Mexico City," Penny interjected.

"Of course not. The temperature is much too cool." He slipped his phone into his pocket. "The Silver Snail is on the south side of Queen Street. We'll cross here."

The pair waited until the light turned green and they crossed.

"At least they have some cool clothing shops to look through while ya get all superhero-y on me," Penny said cheerily.

"I'm not a child," sniffed Sheldon. "This is not my first comic book store, thank you very much. I'll just go in there and--oh!" His eyes widened as he saw Thor and Captain America expertly painted on the wall of the upcoming building. Heart pounding, his steps increased and as he neared even more heroes came into view on the front bricks of the store: the Flash and Spectre and Hulk and Spider-Man and Iron Man and countless others.

Penny smirked as they stopped in front of the store so Sheldon could take in the artwork. He barely noticed the click and flash of Penny's phone as she took a picture of her friend.

"There's Bat-Man," she said. "Go stand by him and I'll take a picture." Sheldon veritably bounded over there and stood poker stiff next to the Caped Crusader with Green Lantern hovering just above him for a cherry on top. There was a slight smile on the physicist's face that to Penny made him appear younger than twenty six.

"Enough with the appetizers, now for the entree." Sheldon opened the door and they entered a large area with busts and statues of more comic book, fantasy and spacey things than Penny had names to and the cash to the left. Straight ahead was another room where she could see some comic bins.

"Stuart would be in heaven if his store was like this," she mused. "Hey, who's the guy in the trench coat?"

They walked over to a life-size mannequin in a trench coat and hat who was wearing some kind of stained mask.
"That's Rorschach from the Alan Moore series The Watchmen," said Sheldon. "The inkblot on his mask constantly morphs based on the ambiguous designs used in Rorschach inkblot tests."

"So what's his power?"

"Nothing obvious. He's strong-willed and is of peak-human physical strength with considerable combat skills. What makes him particularly dangerous is his ability to adapt household objects into tools or weapons, such as pepper to blind a police officer. During the series he employs cooking fat, a toilet bowl, a cigarette, a fork and his jacket as weapons."

"Kewlies," said Penny.

"Meemaw can do much the same. She took out a prairie dog with a gravy boat."

"Sounds like my kind of woman. Now go look at your comic book stuff so we can get to Kensington Market before it closes," Penny pressed.

"Actually the Market closes late," said the clerk at the cash wearing a Death's Head t-shirt. "But if you're pressed for time it's just north on Spadina so you can walk there from here."

"I'd rather you stay in the immediate vicinity and we can go to the Market together," said Sheldon.

"Fair enough," agreed Penny. "I'll give you what, a half hour?" Sheldon pursed his lips. "Okay an hour and then we're outta here."

"Deal." And with that Sheldon scampered to the comics room.

"Well at least I'll know where he is," chuckled Penny to the clerk. "It's like taking a kid to a candy store."

"Wait until he realizes there's a second floor," grinned the clerk.

"Oh great," Penny mock-sighed. "Well, if you hear mass amounts of fussing an hour from now it'll just be us trying to leave."

The clerk snorted. "Believe me, I'm used to seeing girlfriends dragging out their fellas. Although to be fair a lot of girls read comics, too, so they often shop together."

"I'm more of a shoe kinda gal."

"You could always combine the two. You know, buy boots and shoes worn by superheroes." The clerk noted Penny's strange look. "Uh, just a suggestion." He looked gratefully at a young man coming towards him with a handful of comic books. "I can help you here!" he said overenthusiastically.

'Wow', mouthed Penny as she exited the shop.

XxX

"Look at all the clothes!" Penny gasped as Sheldon and she entered Kensington Market, which was a series of roadways and shops tucked in west of Spadina. There were racks of clothes on the lawns of historic houses which had been converted into various boutiques.

"I thought you had more than an adequate supply of clothes," said Sheldon as Penny bee-lined to the left and began searching the racks.

"Since when does a girl ever have enough clothes?" she snorted.
"How about when she can't fit them into her closet or dresser and is forced to leave them strewn about her apartment?"

Penny wrinkled her nose. "Well it's a good thing no one around here's like that."

"Your sarcasm is noted."

Penny took out a yellow peasant top with half-sleeves and held it up. "What ya think?"

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. "You have a red one like that which you've only worn twice since I've known you."

"Yeah, but I don't have a yellow one."

"How is changing the color going to make you wear it more frequently?"

"Because it's a fun top," said Penny as she continued looking through the rack.

"So the other top is no longer 'fun'?"

"Sheldon, you're a guy with, like, a zillion t-shirts in a hundred different colors. Are you telling me you don't have favorites?"

"Of course I have favorites," Sheldon tutted.

"Well there ya go."

"I don't follow."

Penny took out a purple tank top.

"Too dark," she said and put it back. "What I mean is that you have shirts you wear more often since they're favorites. Well I'm the same."

"Penny, we're not the same in any context," Sheldon said in a condescending tone. Penny stuck out her tongue and continued shopping. "Whereas you pick out clothing according to your heart's desire I have both an order and schedule to my clothing."

"Yeah? Well what do you wear on Fridays?"

"Flash apparel."

"Mondays?"

"Green Lantern Corps. The first Monday of the month is traditional green followed by red, indigo and blue."

A smile came to Penny's face. "What about months where there are five Mondays?"

"That's when I pull out the black one."

Penny paused by the pants rack. "You ever think of wearing jeans?"

Sheldon made a face. "I wore them until I went to university. Eleven years old never came fast enough."
"What's wrong with them?"

"They're hot in summer, cool in winter and are usually of one color," he sniffed.

"But they show off your butt."

"So does a football uniform but I won't wear that, either."

"You're impossible," Penny chuckled.

"Not true," he countered. "For instance you gave me an hour at the comic book shop so I'm reciprocating with an hour here even though I'll be bored out of my mind."

"Why don't you sit on the stairs and read some comics?"

"Comic books and do you even listen to yourself? One, I'd be sitting on stairs where thousands of shoes have traveled. Two, I don't have any forensic gloves with which to handle the comic books. Three--"

"Well, then I guess you're just gonna have to be my fashion advisor and dress up doll," Penny said cheerily and grabbed Sheldon by the wrist and began to drag him up the stairs into the house.

Sheldon noted the name of the business in the window and grunted in agreement.

"'Courage, My Love', indeed," he muttered.

XxX

The elevator doors opened and Penny and Sheldon emerged carrying an assortment of bags from various stores.

"I totally forgot about the exchange rate," gushed Penny as they walked down the hall towards their hotel rooms. "Man, I made a killing."

"If by killing you mean your budget then congratulations," Sheldon replied drolly.

"You know, for someone who yawned his way through dinner you're kinda chippy."

"I believe the term is sarcastic."

"See? I'm rubbing off on you," Penny said, pleased.

"Just as I feared, you're contagious." Sheldon pulled out his passkey and opened his door.

"Well I guess I'll see ya bright and early," Penny said.

"Yes. Goodnight." He closed the door behind him without looking back.

Penny chuckled as she took in the whiteness of his door before going to her room. She dumped her purchases on a chair before going into her suitcase for her vanity bag and pajamas. After changing clothes and washing up she turned down the bedding. There was no point setting an alarm since she was positive Sheldon would wake her up.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."
Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

"Kinda like that," laughed Penny as she went to open the door to a red plaid pajama and house-coated Sheldon. "'Sup, buttercup?"

"You gave me a garment bag to carry," he said as he held it out for her to take.

"Thanks." She waited for him to go but Sheldon stayed where he was. "Wanna come in?"

"It's an early day tomorrow."

He still didn't move.

"Thanks for Kensington," Penny continued. "You were an absolute trooper for staying."

"Never let it be said that I won't 'take one for the team'," Sheldon replied.

"You sure you don't wanna come in?"

"Alright." Sheldon stepped by her into the room.

Now curious, Penny closed her door and followed him to the bed where they both sat.

"Casa Loma doesn't open until ten o'clock so I'll wake you at eight," he said. "It's best if we arrive early since it'll give you adequate time to go through the shoe museum in the afternoon."

"Wow, a castle and a shoe museum. You really know how to treat a girl."

"There are castles in California, Hearst Castle, for instance. Amoroso Winery Castle in Napa Valley. The Mission Inn in Riverside. Castle Hill at the Legoland Resort."

Penny laughed. "Of course you’d pick that one."

"Actually from what I understand Rajesh is smitten with the place."

"That’s okay. I’d rather go with you. You talk."

"There’s that." Silence. He leaned towards her. "Penny?"

"Yes?" she breathed.

"Have we engaged in adequate chit chat so I can excuse myself for bed?"

She gave a funny smirk. "Yeah. Sure." He nodded and stood up.

"Good night," he said with an awkward smile and departed.

Penny shook her head. "I must be insane."

xTBBTx

"I'm ecstatic you're both back," gushed Amy as Sheldon, Penny and she exited the elevator at their floor. "Now that I have a social life again we'll have to do something soon."

"The first thing I have to do after unpacking is inspect the apartment," said Sheldon. "Leaving Leonard in charge for four months is like asking a chihuahua pup not to soil your home while you spend the day at work."
"He's not that bad," chided Penny as she unlocked her door.

"We'll see," sniffed Sheldon as he opened his door and stepped inside to find Leonard, Raj and an Indian woman with familial similarities to the astrophysicist.

"Hey Sheldon," Leonard said amiably as he sat in his stuffed chair. "Welcome home."

"Thank you," the lanky physicist replied as he slipped off his shoes and sprayed his feet. "Raj, you're in my spot."

"It's true," said Priya to her brother. "It's in the Roommate Agreement."

"And who are we to argue with the Roommate Agreement?" Raj replied enthusiastically as he got up and moved to the other end of the couch.

"Indeed," said Sheldon as he gathered his stuff.

Leonard flashed a pumpkin smile but quickly got it under control.

"Listen, I was thinking to celebrate we could have the gang over for some Greek food tomorrow," he said.

"It can't be. Tomorrow is Thai food," amended Sheldon as he crossed through the living room with his baggage.

"Ah yes," said Leonard. "Well, I have something to say about that afterwards. Or more to the point my lawyer does."

Sheldon stopped and turned to eye Priya, who smiled confidently back. With a scowl Sheldon stomped off to his room.

XxX

"So, how was the trip?" pressed Amy as Penny unpacked her suitcase in the bedroom.

"Awesome," grinned Penny. "I shopped and the shoe museum was to die for. There were a couple of Prada shoes I was seriously considering jail for, I wanted them so badly."

"And Sheldon? How did he take your surprise visit?"

"Oh, he complained of course but I think he was pleased to see me," said Penny as she dumped her dirty laundry in the clothes basket. "He took me to the physics lab where he worked." She took out her makeup bag and walked it into her bathroom.

"And?" said Amy as she sat on the corner of the bed.

"Don't get me wrong, it was boring as anything. But," Here Penny stopped to regard her friend. "When I heard Dr. Cooper, not Sheldon, not Dr. C, talking about monopoles this and dark matter that I kept thinking that I am so over my head with this."

"I don't follow. Sheldon knows you're not scientifically inclined."

"It's not that. It's--" Penny sighed. "I don't get how he could be interested in me."

Amy snorted. "Some would wonder how you could be interested in him."

Penny shrugged. "I dunno. I mean he's stubborn and completely anal and yet he's there for me in
his own whacked way." She gave Amy a little smile. "He’s really okay if you give him a chance."

"And that’s why you’re an angel, Penny," Amy said matter-of-factly. "You are."

"I suppose." Penny moved her suitcase to the floor and sat on the bed. "You know what was really cool? He told me about his grandfather and how they played with helium balloons. I think he was the first person who 'got' Sheldon."

"Sheldon is unique to be sure," agreed Amy.

"It was nice hearing him open up." Penny smiled. "He said he was glad I was there."

"Which for Sheldon is the equivalent of standing on a mountain top shouting your name to the heavens."

"I wouldn't go that far," chuckled Penny. "But it was nice. Ooo! Speaking of nice, you've gotta see the shoes I picked up. And for only seventy bucks!" Penny darted off the bed to the living room to get her back pack.

"Time to initiate Phase Two of 'Project Gorilla'," Amy murmured to herself before following her friend.

xTBBTx

Amy ran her fingers along the harp strings to warm up. She cleared her throat and began to play. "I'm a cowboy," she sang. "On a steel horse I ride. I'm wanted--dead or alive. Dead or al--"

Knock Knock Knock "Amy."

Knock Knock Knock "Amy."

Knock Knock Knock "Amy."

"Curious." Amy set her harp on its base and went to the door. She opened it to find Sheldon before her looking quite agitated. "What's wrong, Sheldon?"

"What's wrong?" spat Sheldon. "We had lamb for dinner yesterday and the cereal is out of order and you're interrogating me without asking me in."

"Forgive me." She stood back and Sheldon entered and began pacing in her living room. "You're distressed. Would you like a hot beverage?"

"What I want is a functioning sonic death ray," growled Sheldon. "This is all Penny's fault."

"What is?" Amy said in a soothing voice as she sat on the couch. "Sheldon, start at the beginning."

"March first, two thousand and six. I was coming home with dinner in hand when I first saw Penny unpacking. She--"

"Perhaps not that far. Let's go over the past twenty four hours."

Sheldon stopped pacing and turned to face his friend.

"Leonard got an attorney to look over the Roommate Agreement," seethed Sheldon. "According to her it's 'too vague' and 'subject to interpretation'."
"Hence why we had lamb yesterday," replied Amy.

"Lamb yesterday, disorganized cereal today. Dr. Stephanie and Leonard were sharing a shower which completely violates the--" A series of twitches covered his face as he clamped his mouth shut to control himself.

"Perhaps you could go over the agreement and rectify the situation?"

"Leonard canceled it!"

"Ah."

"All this is Penny's fault! I never would have had a roommate without her insistence and now I have to live with chaos. Four months away from home and what am I returning to?" He shook his head disgustedly. "This past weekend is but a sample of my hell to come."

Amy was shocked. "You mean you didn't have fun with Penny?"

"She took me to clothing stores and we went to a shoe museum. Let me tell you with an eidetic memory I learned more about shoes in two and a half hours than a man has need of."

"That's too bad. Penny was under the impression you were happy to see her."

Sheldon paused. "I wasn't unhappy," he said at last.

Amy raised an eyebrow but chose to ignore his less than forthcoming reply.

"Perhaps we should try another experiment," she said. "This time I'll dip into my neurobiological bag of tricks."

"What, drug Leonard and in his less than lucid state force him to resign the Roommate Agreement?"

"That could work although it does have the down side of being a felony. I was thinking more along the lines of having you loosen up."

"Now that's just crazy talk," scoffed Sheldon.

"Penny had a good time with you outside of the neighbor paradigm," pressed Amy.

Sheldon snorted. "The museum was nirvana for her."

"Actually it was getting to know you better. She liked your talks about your grandfather and was completely 'blown away' by the research facility."

"It’s a minor lab."

"It’s what it represents. Sheldon, she doesn’t see how you could be interested in her."

Sheldon pursed his lips. "You’re the one insisting I have ‘feelings’ for her."

"You haven’t exactly been forthcoming with a contrary argument," countered Amy, garnering a glare. "She’s seen your other side and she likes it. Go with the flow."

"I’ve my research."
"I’m not saying you should slack. You keep spouting about balance in the Force. Here’s your opportunity to try adding a little randomness to your life."

Sheldon took a moment to process the idea.

"I still won’t eat lamb," he said stiffly.

"So let me get this straight," said Raj as he looked across the lunch table at a dejected Leonard. "Stephanie gave you glorious make up sex every time you brought up how fast the relationship was going so you thought you’d fix that by questioning why she was having sex with you?"

"Not one of my more brilliant moments," sighed Leonard. He set down his fork and leaned back in his chair. "I mean the sex was great but I just wish she could have slowed things down a little. She was talking living together and, hell, she bought me a duvet."

"Nice," smiled Raj.

"No, not nice," Leonard frowned. "She moved my Bat-signal and there was incense all over the place and--"

"And Leonard was scared because this was his first serious relationship."

"She talked about 'scary good' and I was like, when is scary ever good?" Leonard shrugged. "That's when things got scary."

"You mean that's when she dumped you."

"Yeah." Leonard gave a sad snort. "You know what's stupid? I miss the smell of incense in my room but at the same time I feel like a weight's been lifted."

"I think they call it maturity," Raj said with a smirk. "You might want to try it again sometime if you want an adult relationship."

"Maybe." Leonard sighed again. "What kind of a world is it where Howard has a girlfriend and Sheldon has a sort-of girlfriend and I’m alone?"

"He-ll-o! I'm not exactly tripping over girls here," replied Raj.

"True," Leonard said, brightening. "I guess things could be worse."

"Thanks," snapped Raj.

"Dr. Hofstadter?" said a woman's voice and the two physicists turned to see a pretty Asian woman with long black hair wearing a long-sleeve red top and black slacks.

"Uh, yeah," Leonard stammered. "I mean, yes. Yes?"

"My name's Joyce Kim and I'm a graduate student in engineering," she said. "I was looking over the faculty listings and noticed that you were working on lensless imaging."

"Yes I am. I'm using OPA-driven high-harmonic generation."

"That's awesome." She flashed a smile. "I'd sure love to see what you're doing some time."

"Well, I'm working on it now so if you're not busy I could show you my lab."
"Sounds great," she said brightly.

Leonard got up and the pair of them walked to the exit.

"So what's your area of research?" he asked as he threw out his food and placed the lunch tray on the stack.

"I'm working on resonant curved piezoelectric cantilever fluid diode wings for mass-producible flying microrobots."

"Wow, that's cool."

"It's okay. But between you and me I'd much rather play with rockets," Joyce said wistfully.

"Really?" said Leonard as they walked out of the lunch room.

"I used to build my own rockets," Joyce said.

"Me too!" gushed Leonard and the door closed behind them.

In the dining hall Raj sat with his arms folded across his chest and a scowl on his face.

"Who died and made Leonard a hot stud?" he snapped.

"Oh great, here comes lover boy," growled Raj to Howard as Leonard and Joyce came into the main room at the Cheesecake Factory.

"Be nice," said Howard. "You never know if she has a sister."

"Hey guys," said Leonard sprightly. "This is Joyce."

"Joyce," nodded Sheldon. "Dr. Hofstadter."

"Sheldon, not now," sighed Leonard as both Joyce and he sat.

"I'm sorry, but you dissolved the Roommate Agreement including the Friendship Clause thus making us nothing more than roommates with nothing in common save our living arrangements," Sheldon said casually as he flipped through the menu.

"You mean aside from working at the same place, shopping at the same comic book store, eating at the same restaurants and playing the same video games," said Raj. "You're right, you don't have anything in common."

"Perhaps we'll discuss the Roommate Agreement at another time," said Amy to smooth the situation. "After all we have a guest."

"Which we would have known about earlier had someone followed protocol," sniffed Sheldon.

"But we're past that now," Amy insisted. Sheldon's mouth pursed as he did his best to stop his lips from twitching.

"Hey guys," said Penny as she arrived at the table with drinks. She noted Joyce and Leonard. "Didn't think you were gonna make it," she said to the physicist.
"Joyce and I were late at the lab," Leonard said.

"Okay well I know you want a diet coke," Penny scribbled on her pad. "And you?" she said to Joyce.

"I'll have a ginger ale, no ice," said Joyce.

"Great. Well I'll let the two of you go through the menu while I grab the rest of the gang." Penny smirked at Sheldon. "And what would you like, kind sir?"

Sheldon closed the menu. "I'll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger."

"I'll make sure they put it in the right order this time," Penny added as she wrote.

"That's not necessary," Sheldon said. Penny almost broke the lead on her pencil even as Sheldon glanced at Amy for support. The neurobiologist gave a slight nod. "Go nuts with it," he said as he handed Penny the menu.

"Uh, sure," she said.

"I'll take the pork chop and baked potato," said Howard as he got up from the table. "If you'll excuse me I'm going to say hello to Bernie."

Leonard raised an eyebrow. "What's going on?" he asked Sheldon.

"I'll have fish and chips," said Raj to Penny.

"Nothing," said Sheldon. "I'm just broadening my horizons."

"Veggie burger for me with salad on the side," said Amy. "Light Italian dressing."

"Sounds good. I'll be right back," said Penny and departed.

"Perhaps afterwards we can play Halo," continued Sheldon.

Raj looked incredulously at Leonard before turning to Sheldon. "But tomorrow's Halo night," he gasped.

"No," amended Sheldon. "Wednesday just happens to be the day we play Halo." His mouth twitched and he took a sip of lemonade.

Amy could feel Sheldon's unease and sought to change the subject.

"Well I have to call it an early night if I'm to be fresh for the next phase of the addiction study. We're switching from menthol to regular cigarettes to see if the consumption level drops."

"Fascinating," Leonard said as he kept staring at his roommate.

XxX

"Maybe tomorrow we can play Zork II," said Sheldon as he tossed out the potato chip and pretzel bags.

"But that's a vintage game," said Leonard who had paused as he gathered the glasses on the coffee table.

"Yes, it is," Sheldon said enthusiastically. "Made in nineteen eighty it's erroneously thought to be
a sequel to Zork I when in fact it--" He stopped short and a twitchy smile came to his face. "We'll talk more about it tomorrow."

Leonard stood straight and folded his arms across his chest.

"Okay Sheldon, what's going on?" he said with a scowl.

Sheldon turned away from his roommate to stare at his fecal chart on the refrigerator.

"I don't know what you mean," he said innocently although Leonard could see a tic nearly close his right eye.

"You'd rather give up a kidney than move Halo night," said Leonard.

"You're exaggerating."

"What about the hamburger? 'Go nuts with it'?"

"Dr. Hofstadter, I’ve ordered the hamburger a plethora of times and haven’t been poisoned. I didn’t die tonight." Sheldon gave a hard blink. "Although I would have preferred the cheese on top of the bacon"--his upper lip crunched as his nose twitched--"and a little less barbecue sauce"--his hands began to clench repeatedly--"and perhaps the patty better centered on my bun but that doesn’t mean my dinner was ruined."

"Sheldon--"

"Now if you'll excuse me it’s time for my shower," said Sheldon who then dashed to his bedroom.

xTBBTx

The elevator doors opened and Leonard and Joyce exited onto his floor.

"This was fun," he said cheerily. "Dinner. A movie."

"Yes, who knew a documentary on dams could be so--long," Joyce said diplomatically.

"Well to be fair there's a lot of dams so three hours barely touches the whole debate," Leonard pulled out his keys and paused. Sheldon had been acting weird for days with his 'Dr. Hofstadter this' and constant reminder of how things used to be under the Roommate Agreement.

"Maybe we should go get a coffee or something?" he said and then felt what seemed to be an electric jolt as Joyce's hand began rubbing his lower back.

"Surely we can have something here." She leaned in so her breath tickled Leonard's ear. "Besides, I really want to see your model rocket."

"Actually I have several rockets," said Leonard as he unlocked the door. "Wait until you see the latest. I--"

He stopped dead as he saw Sheldon standing before a video camera wearing Bavarian lederhosen, knee high socks and a dark hat with a feather in it.

"Guten Tag, das YouTube," said Sheldon. "Ich bin ein Bavarian. Und dis is Sheldon Cooper Presents Fun Mit Flags."

Leonard quickly closed the door although he made sure not to make a sound.
"What?" asked Joyce.

"I don't think now's a good time," he said diplomatically.

Sheldon sat at his computer desk typing away when his phone buzzed. He picked it up to see he had a text:

Penny: I need 2 c u now.

"Goodbye English language," Sheldon said with a shake of the head.

He got up and went to the door. Automatically he kicked off his house slippers for his hallway ones before his conversation with Amy came to mind.

"Loosen up, Dr. C," he breathed and put his house slippers back on and opened the door. He took a breath and then strode with purpose to Penny's door.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

"Door's open, Sheldon," she called.

"You realize I could be anyone," he tsked as he entered and closed the door.

"Trust me, no one could be you," Penny said diplomatically as she sat in what Sheldon noticed was a new red lazyboy chair.

"Where's my chair?" he asked as he looked around the apartment.

"In the bedroom. I got something better." She got out of her seat and gave a Price Is Right 'ta-da' gesture with her hands.

"We'll see about that," Sheldon walked over to the chair and inspected it from all sides before carefully seating himself. Immediately he smiled. "My, this is a comfy chair."

"I know," said Penny as she settled herself on the couch. "Now that you're okay I just want to know if you're, well, okay?"

Sheldon cocked his head. "Why are you asking?"

Penny thought over what Leonard had said about Sheldon playing dress up. The experimental physicist was concerned but as 'just a roommate' he felt he couldn't broach the subject with Sheldon.

"You seem weird lately," she said. Immediately Sheldon was serious.

"In what way?"

"I dunno. You freaked me out with the hamburger thing."

"Penny, it's just a hamburger," Sheldon scoffed although his hands involuntarily twitched.
"See? There you go again!" Penny sat at the edge of the couch. "That's so not like you. And you keep twitching so don't tell me this isn't bothering you." Sheldon turned away to look out her window. "Sheldon, what's wrong?"

"I wholeheartedly approve of this chair," he said amiably. "It aligns the lumbar, cradles the coccyx--"

"Sheldon."

"--balances the buttocks." He squirmed his butt into the cushion. "Where did you get it? Home Sense?"

"On the curb."

"Never heard of the place."

Penny snorted. "No, on the street curb."

The smile vanished from Sheldon's face.

"What?" he said in a strangled voice.

"It was just sitting on the street and I thought, 'wow, it'd be great in my--'"

"Good Lord!" Sheldon screeched and bolted from the chair. "From the street?!" He kicked off his slippers and frantically undid his belt and let his pants fall to the floor.

"Sheldon it's okay," Penny said as the physicist stripped out of his shirts and raced to her washroom. She heard her shower turn on.

"Eh, maybe he's okay after all," she shrugged.

XxX

Penny finished putting away her dishes from the drain rack as Sheldon came into the living room with a towel around his waist. Immediately the Nebraskan was in shock as she took in his skin's redness and the obvious nail marks from where he had scrubbed.

"Holy shit, Sheldon!" she gasped. "You're a lobster!"

"I had to get clean," he replied as he glared at the chair. "That has to go."

"It's a perfectly good chair," Penny countered with a frown. "You said so yourself."

"No, what I meant to say is that it's comfortable for a disease ridden death trap. Now get rid of it."

"No," she said firmly and sat in the chair.

"What are you doing?" gasped Sheldon.

"Taking a stand--metaphorically speaking."

"Terrific. Now you're contaminated."

"No I'm not. I've been sitting in it all afternoon and--" Penny winced. "There's nothing wrong with--ouch!" She jumped off the chair. Immediately a mouse-sized bump scurried under the cushion cover.
Sheldon and Penny screamed and darted out of the apartment. The physicist tried to open his door but it was locked so Penny and he continued down the stairs.

As they hit the first floor Penny began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" gasped Sheldon as he tried to catch his breath. "Your apartment's infested."

"Yeah but the look on your face," she giggled. "You weren't exactly stoic."

"Neither were you," Sheldon huffed.

"Yeah but I'm not standing in the lobby wearing nothing but a towel."

Sheldon blanched and his hand instinctively went to cover his privates. Just then the elevator doors opened and out came Mrs. Vartabedian.

"Good evening, Penny," she said with a smile on her face. "Dr. Cooper."

"Mrs. Vartabedian," Sheldon mumbled, his cheeks crimson as he darted inside the elevator. Penny followed and the doors closed.

"I thought you were the Flash on Fridays?" she said to ease the tension.

"Not funny," Sheldon said stiffly as he pressed the button for the fourth floor.

"Cheer up, buttercup," Penny soothed.

"You're not the one standing nearly naked in an elevator."

"True." Penny glanced at Sheldon's pale skin and perfectly perky nipples that were neither too big or too sm- She closed her eyes to quash the thought, albeit unsuccessfully.

The elevator stopped at their floor and they got out.

"Well, better get that thing to the curb," sighed Penny.

"I'll give you a hand," Sheldon replied.

"Really?"

"I have a hazmat suit for emergency purposes."

The door to 4A opened to reveal a puzzled Leonard.

"What's going on?" he asked. "I heard screaming but--"

"Close the door before it spreads!" shouted Sheldon before knocking Leonard into the apartment and closing and locking the door behind them.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Rorschach

Shoop: Salt n Pepa

Wanted Dead or Alive: Bon Jovi
Sheldon opened the apartment door to find the gang sans Amy eating dinner.

"Excuse my tardiness friends. Dr. Hofstadter," he added as he put on his house slippers.

"'Sup?" said Leonard before taking a sip of water.

"'Sup," replied Sheldon. He took off his jacket and went to clean his hands.

"You guys still not talking?" asked Bernadette.

"Oh, we're talking. Only we're supposed to be all formal since we apparently aren't friends because I won't sign the stupid Roommate Agreement," sighed Leonard.

"Roommate Agreement?" asked Joyce.

"A binding document outlining the rights and responsibilities each roommate has while living in this apartment," said Sheldon as he came down the hall.

Joyce looked to Leonard. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"Obviously you've never had to schedule your number twos in writing," chuckled Howard.

"Really?" gasped Joyce.

"As a bright side you won't have to fill out paperwork to have a woman over," Raj said to Leonard.

"Paperwork?" grinned Joyce.

"Yes, paperwork," tutted Sheldon "Now can we change the subject?" He sat in his spot and grabbed his box of Chinese food.

"So Leonard tells us you've gotten some kind of award?" said Penny with her mouth full.

"There's a rumor that I'm to receive the Chancellor's Medal for science, yes."

"Congratulations!" squeaked Bernadette.

"Premature," countered Sheldon. "It's merely rumor and--"

The phone rang. Sheldon picked it up.

"Huh. It's President Siebert."

"Totally psychic," said Penny.

"We're not starting that again, are we?" sighed Sheldon before answering. "Good evening President Siebert...why thank you...oh. What if I don't want to make a speech?... Ah. I see.
Alright, I guess I have no other choice...Thank you. Goodnight." Sheldon hung up the phone and looked to his friends. "Apparently I'm being awarded the Chancellor's Medal for science."

"Congratulations buddy," gushed Raj.

"Although I seem to be in a pickle."

"Oh?" asked Leonard.

"Apparently receiving the medal requires me to deliver a speech at the President's Dinner. I don't give speeches."

Howard laughed. "Like hell you don't give speeches. You gave us a five minute spiel at lunch about why chocolate pudding is the best."

"We are a group of four," explained Sheldon. "At the dinner there will be more than thirty six adults."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Penny.

"There's enough people to trample me to death."

"They won't trample you, Sheldon," Leonard said with a smile. *Now this sounds like the Sheldon I know.*

"Besides, you deserve the award, right?" prompted Penny.

"Of course," Sheldon sniffed.

"Then go get it."

"You make it sound easy," Sheldon said with pursed lips.

Penny smiled kindly. "It's easy peasy, Dr. C. If you want something badly enough then it's worth the pain."

Sheldon paused as he took in Penny before speaking.

"You're right," he said, trying desperately to keep from twitching. "The chances of there being a fire or earthquake are relatively minor." He put on a brave smile and a tic moved his lips. "It's just an award. No biggie." Sheldon took a bite of his chicken satay.

Howard turned to Raj.

"Remind me to look for the pod in Sheldon's office," he said.

"What pod?" asked the astrophysicist.

"The one that switched Sheldons."

XxX

Sheldon closed his bedroom door and took off his housecoat and hung it up before retiring to his bed. He got in between the sheets and then leaned over to his nightstand and pulled out his journal. Today had been eventful. He'd won the Chancellor's Medal for science and he was going to give a speech. Penny was right: he did want the award so change was necessary.
Hadn't Amy said something similar regarding Penny?

The physicist shook his head. All this emphasis on change. He hated it. And yet everything he wanted seemed to require it.

"Suck it up, Dr. C," he murmured and opened the journal to the last page. He took up the pen but found himself unable to write as his hand was shaking. He set down the pen and tried unsuccessfully to take a deep breath.

A hundred people in the crowd.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his drawn up knees and did his best to breathe.

xTBBTx

Leonard sat in his stuffed chair watching television with a frown on his face. Something was definitely going on with Sheldon far beyond the normal amount of crazy that emanated from the lanky physicist. Still, Penny didn't seem to be concerned or at least she kept her feelings to herself. He'd have to ask her opinion. Sheldon didn't just order a hamburger or view an award and speech as 'no biggie' and he most definitely wouldn't get up on a Saturday so he could go--

The phone rang and Leonard hit the mute button on the remote before answering.

"Hello?" he said.

"Good morning. It's Amy Farrah Fowler looking for Sheldon."

"He's not here."

"I've tried his cell phone but he's not answering."

"His cell phone's here. He didn't need it since he went jogging with Penny."

"Jogging? Fascinating."

"Amy, what's going on?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sheldon doesn't jog. Heck he rarely takes the stairs."

"Perhaps he's turning over a new leaf?"

"Unless it's a marijuana leaf I don't buy it."

"Clearly we're at an impasse. Tell Sheldon to contact me later. Goodbye."

Leonard pursed his lips as he hung up and put the phone back in its cradle.

"New leaf," he muttered. Something must have happened on the Arctic trip to trigger this transformation. That, or the cancellation of the Roommate Agreement really threw Sheldon for a loop.

"I will not break. There's no way I'm going to sign that stupid thing even if Sheldon goes--"

The door opened and an exhausted Sheldon wearing a Green Arrow t-shirt over a red thermal and plaid walking shorts entered the apartment.
"Well that was some workout," he said as he sprayed the bottoms of his shoes before crossing over to the hall. "I'll have to rehydrate and have a shower."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Dr. Hofstadter, I've never felt better." Sheldon disappeared around the corner.

Leonard shrugged and unmuted the television. Minutes turned into a half hour and there still wasn't the sound of running water from the washroom. He turned off the television and went down the hall to Sheldon's room.

"Sheldon?" he asked tentatively.

Silence.

"Sheldon?" Leonard pushed open his roommate's door to find Sheldon asleep belly side down on the bed. His shoes were still on.

Leonard stood a moment in thought before silently closing the door.

xTBBTx

Penny got up and stretched. Last night with Gwen was fun and well needed since it'd been a dog's age since she'd been out dancing. Granted, not getting plastered did take some of the fun out of it but she found that waking up to a hangover and wondering who was in her bed was something she didn't miss. Besides, she was kinda sorta seeing someone although not really.

"Man, I need a life," Penny snorted as she tossed back the covers and got out of bed.

After using the washroom and running her fingers through her hair to get it past the bedhead look she went into the kitchen for her coffee mug.

"Thank God Leonard gets up later on Saturday," she sighed happily and after grabbing her keys she went to 4A.

Upon knocking and opening the door she was shocked to see a strange man sitting on the couch. He was broad shouldered although a little bit on the fluffy side. Across the way in the kitchen were Leonard and Sheldon, both of whom looked extremely uncomfortable. Normally Penny would have excused herself but something told her to stay.

"Is that French toast?" she said cheerily as she came in. She looked to the stranger. "Hey, I'm Penny."

"Jimmy," the man replied, stunned at the presence of a blonde hottie in Leonard's apartment.

"Coffee's ready," Leonard said in what Penny instantly picked up as mock enthusiasm.

"You better get some," said Jimmy. "Nancy makes a great cup of Joe."

"Nancy?" asked Penny as she crossed over to Leonard and held out her mug.

"I used to call him that in high school," chuckled Jimmy.

"For three years," mumbled Leonard under his breath.

Before Penny could ask Sheldon had his milk carton in hand and deftly poured some into her cup.
"Thanks," she said.

"Perhaps you'd better go," Sheldon said as he glanced over her shoulder at Jimmy. Penny took a sip of coffee and gave an icy smirk.

"And miss out talking to ol' Jimmy here?" She went to Sheldon's computer chair and rolled it by Leonard's chair and sat. "So," she said to Jimmy. "You're a friend of Leonard's?"

"If by friend you mean the bane of his adolescent existence then yes," said Sheldon.

Jimmy laughed. "Nancy and I were a comedy pair, always joking around."

"You made him floss with his own shoelaces," Sheldon said testily.

"You should have seen this guy back in the day," chuckled Jimmy. "He was so little he could fit in just about anywhere. Lockers, trash cans. Oh, man, how did you get inside that backpack?"

"You helped," Leonard said with a frown.

"Speaking of helping." Penny got up from her seat and went to the counter where she set down her mug. "Sorry you won't be here for breakfast, Jimmy."

Jimmy smirked. "Actually Nancy said--"

"I don't think you heard me," said Penny as she took the hot frying pan off the stove and unceremoniously dumped the two well-done pieces of French toast on the counter before heading over to Jimmy. "I said, you're leaving."

Jimmy might not have known a lot but he did recognize a 'don't mess with me' look when he saw one.

"Maybe I'll shove off," Jimmy said as he quickly popped off the couch and darted for the door. "I'll see ya around, Nancy."

"Not now. Not ever," growled Penny who charged at the big man. Jimmy tore open the door and both Penny and he disappeared around the corner.

Sheldon and Leonard rushed to the door just as a laughing Penny came up the stairs to their floor.

"For a big guy he can sure move his ass," she chuckled.

"Penny, you have to quit chasing people down the stairs with blunt instruments," Sheldon scolded.

"Yeah, whatever." She handed Leonard the frying pan. "You realize you owe me breakfast for this."

"Yes, Ma'am," Leonard piped.

"Let me grab my mom's strawberry jam. You'll love it," she said and went to her door.

Leonard went to the kitchen and put the frying pan under the tap to clean it off.

"Penny's amazing," he gushed. "She's funny, beautiful--"

"And lethal," said Sheldon.
"But that's just a part of her charm." Leonard smiled. "Good thing we agreed I wasn't her gay friend because if she ever changed her mi--ouch!" Leonard turned, his right shoulder blade smarting from a chop to the back, to see Sheldon behind him with a grave look on his face. "What the hell, Sheldon? I was joking!"

"Penny is not for you," Sheldon said evenly although his eyes were furious. "I repeat, not for you."

He stomped down the hall into the washroom.

Penny entered the apartment with the jam.

"Where's Sheldon?" she asked.

"Beats the hell out of me," said Leonard. "But the guy I live with is in the can."

Leonard's eyes brightened as he entered the lobby to see Penny at the mailbox.

"Penny wait," he said and made his way over.

"What's up, buttercup?" she replied as she looked through her mail.

"I just wanted your opinion on Sheldon," he said while unlocking his mail box. "He seems a little off."

"Yeah that hamburger thing really weirded me out," she agreed.

"And how giving a speech is 'no big deal' even after the trampling comment."

"You noticed the twitches, huh?" Penny with a tight smile.

"More tics than a lyme disease research lab. But it's not just that, he's changed Halo night and plays vintage games whenever and had pizza from a non-Sheldon approved restaurant and just this morning I noticed his poop chart was gone from the fridge."

Penny's eyes widened in surprise. "Seriously? He practically runs his day off that thing." She cocked her head in thought. "And speaking of run I couldn't believe he went jogging with me."

"How did that go?"

"We got about three blocks before he needed a breather," Penny smirked. "We ended up walking more than running but he did give it the college try at the end."

Leonard frowned. "Didn't you ask him why he wanted to jog?"

"Didn't think to. All I asked was if he was sure since I've never seen him run," replied Penny. "I thought it was weird but then again he does weird things, y'know?" Now it was Penny's turn to frown. "Only not weird enough to move the poop chart."

"When I asked what happened to it he said 'what's life without a little whimsy?'"

Penny pursed her lips. "Maybe I should call his mom."

The lobby door opened and Sheldon entered with his messenger bag strung across his body.
"Good afternoon Penny," he said evenly as he went to the mail box.

"I've got the mail," Leonard said as he held up the bundle in his hand.

"You do recall that the Roommate Agreement has been dissolved?" Sheldon reminded him. "As such you're tampering with my mail."

"For God's sake, Sheldon," said Leonard with an exasperated sigh.

"It's not God, Dr. Hofstadter, it's the U.S. Government." Sheldon turned his attention to his neighbor. "Given your shift rotation at the restaurant I believe this is your weekend off is it not?"

"Yup," Penny said warily.

"Good." Sheldon went to the elevator and pushed the button. "I was thinking we could take in Hearst Castle. Drive down Saturday, have a light lunch before sightseeing, a night at a bed and breakfast and then have a leisurely stroll on the coast before the return trip. My treat. Of course you'll have to do the driving."

"I, uh, sure," stammered the waitress as the elevator doors opened. "Sheldon?" He paused. "Is this a date?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he said matter-of-factly and stepped into the elevator.

Leonard and Penny watched the doors close before turning to stare at each other.

Amy poured herself a half glass of cranberry juice and cut it with ice water. She was puzzling over her phone call with Penny. Apparently Sheldon had asked her on a 'date' and instead of being excited Penny seemed disconcerted. The waitress went over her list of concerns regarding the physicist and became suspicious when Amy suggested that perhaps Sheldon was merely expanding his horizons. To ease tension the neurobiologist agreed to talk to Sheldon and see what was up with him.

She sat down on her couch and put the drink on the coaster beside her laptop. After the dinner at the Cheesecake Factory three weeks ago Amy hadn't seen Sheldon apart from Skype calls due to the busy schedule of her addiction study. Admittedly, some of what Penny told her about him was surprising. Throwing caution to the wind ordering a hamburger was one thing but casually stopping his daily fecal records was something else entirely given that he'd kept track since he was potty trained.

"It seems Penny is a better catalyst for change than chocolate," Amy quipped as she clicked the link to Skype Sheldon.

"Why good evening Amy," said Sheldon cheerily before tossing his head to the right. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I heard from Penny last night regarding your plans for this weekend. I admit I was surprised you didn't go over them with me."

"I decided to be spontaneous." He blew upwards to move the hair on his brow.

"I see. And how did it make you feel?"

"It's not really my type of outing but from what I've researched combined with my knowledge of
Penny I'm confident it will be successful." Again he tossed his head.

"You're avoiding the question." Amy gave a slight frown. "And why do you keep tossing your head?"

"My barber was away when I went to get my hair cut and I took that as a sign that perhaps I should grow it out."

"A 'sign'?"

"Penny's always going on about her mumbo-jumbo psychics but there is something liberating about going with the flow." A boyish smile came to his face. "You know, I can't even predict my bowel movements some days?" Again he blew at his bangs.

Amy didn't like this. "Sheldon, perhaps we should put Project Gorilla on a temporary hiatus."

The physicist's smile vanished. "Why?"

"I just want to make sure you're not, what's the clinical term, going ga-ga."

Sheldon shook his head derisively. "Nonsense. Everything's fine." He blew on his bangs. "Now if you'll excuse me I've got to shower and put on my Friday pajamas."

"But it's Thursday."

Sheldon wiggled his eyebrows. "I know, huh?"

The screen went black and Amy's frown and pursed lips were reflected on the darkened monitor.

xTBBTx

As he walked through the Glendale Galleria Sheldon was hunched over his phone making sure he had everything on his list. He had begun an antibiotic regiment the night before and had packed his allergy medication, polysporin, extra hand sanitizer, antibacterial wipes and mini emergency disaster kit in his overnight bag. All that remained was his apparel and according to a plethora of web sites and his observation of Penny's previous suitors he was in a serious need of change.

Sheldon came to a halt in front of Jean Machine. Although Amy had suggested wearing jeans to 'show off his butt' since Penny indicated he had a 'nice one' he felt something deep inside scream out a resounding 'no!' at the idea.

He hated jeans.

Penny liked jeans.

Sheldon liked Penny.

Sheldon needed a pair of jeans?

"What kind of logic is that?" he snorted. "Penny also likes sun tanning on the roof. Should I expose myself to potential melanoma just to fit in? Psh, Dr. Cooper."

And yet he didn't move from his spot in front of the store.

He had two doctorates and a Masters degree. There was no doubt intellectually he was a 'catch'.

But he also had Asperger's.
At least he thought he did. His mother never said anything nor followed up with the specialist in Houston, yet Sheldon knew there had to be something wrong for him not grasping certain things like sarcasm and lying. He had an I.Q. of one hundred and eighty seven for goodness sake; this wasn’t a case of being too stupid to ‘get it’. It took him a while to think things through because he was afraid of making a mistake. Previous mistakes meant thinking someone was his friend when they weren’t or being singled out for beatings, wedgies, swirlies and whatever else passed for public ridicule and torment.

In this instance, Sheldon had finally decided that he liked Penny beyond the agreed upon friendship paradigm. That she agreed to accompany him on a ‘date’ indicated a mutual desire. That or she was just ‘being nice’. Curse you, Amy Farrah Fowler and your stupid Schrodinger’s Cat analogy! Still, the neurobiologist was right; at least after this date he’d know where he stood with Penny. Whether he’d be interested or capable of altering their paradigm.

Capable of altering himself.

Sheldon took a deep breath and went into the store.

As Penny finished packing her overnight bag she heard an unfamiliar rhythm at her door.

Ba-dum-dum "Penny."

Ba-dum-dum "Penny."

Ba-dum-dum "Penny."

Then what sounded like a mini drum solo.

"What the hell?" she breathed and took up her bag and purse and went to answer the door.

"What's going--" Penny stopped dead, her eyes widened as she took in Sheldon before her wearing a grey button down shirt that was open to mid chest to reveal a red Flash t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Slung across his shoulder was a leather strap that held a set of bongo drums comfortably at his hips.

"Good morning, Penny," Sheldon said cheerily. "Your apparel is appropriate," he said as he noted her flowered sundress and red flats.

"Uh, thanks," she said. "You look, uh, appropriate yourself."

Sheldon visibly relaxed. "Shall we go?"

"Sure." Penny closed her door and locked up.

"Let me grab my overnight bag and we'll be off." He drummed his way into his apartment.

"Crap on a cracker," Penny said under her breath.

XxX

Penny chewed on her bottom lip as she drove, mulling about what to say as Sheldon talked about their trip. He accented his conversation with soft pats on his drum.

"Once we get to the Castle we can have a bite to eat at the Visitors Center before exploring."
There's an official tour but I believe I've researched enough to be an adequate guide. For instance, the history of Hearst Castle actually begins in eighteen sixty five when George Hearst purchased forty thousand acres of ranchland. In nineteen nineteen William Randolph Hearst inherited what had grown to more than two hundred and fifty thousa--"

Penny had had enough. "Okay Sheldon, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" replied a puzzled Sheldon. "We're on our way to Hearst Castle."

"No, I mean what is this?" She gave a swirl of her finger to encompass everything.

"Ah." Sheldon frowned. "Was I not clear?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's a date. Only you don't date."

"Just because I haven't dated doesn't mean I 'don't date'. Your logic is flawed."

"But you're all over the place!" Penny gasped. "I mean I saw you eat Honey Puffs on oatmeal day!"

"Oatmeal day'. Psh."

Penny glanced worriedly at her friend.

"Is this about the Roommate Agreement?" she asked.

"Roommate Agreement'. Psh."

"Sheldon, talk to Leonard. I'm sure you can come to a--"

"Penny, are you familiar with entropy?"

"Of course not!"

"Don't kid yourself," Sheldon replied evenly. "It's all around you. When you drop a deck of cards onto the floor they don't arrange themselves by suit or by number. A broken egg won't come back together if you throw it at a wall, just like your apartment continues to get messier because you never clean it up."

"Hey!"

"The second law of thermodynamics. All my life I've had low entropy like an ice cube, ordered and solid. But put that ice cube into a piping hot bowl of random bowel movements and confounding neighbors the molecules inside the ice cube break loose and are able to move as freely as the liquid; their randomness increases and so does their entropy."

Penny was stunned. "What does that even mean?"

"It means I move where the music takes me, Kitten."

Sheldon turned on the radio, gave Penny a smile and then looked out the side window.

XxX

"Oh. My. God," Penny breathed as Sheldon and she neared a giant pool with what looked like a Roman temple across the way. "This is like ancient Greece."
"Actually it's a combination of Greek and Roman," replied Sheldon as his hand absently patted his drum. "The main axis centerpiece and north terminus is the facade of an actual ancient Roman temple that William Randolph Hearst had purchased in Europe and imported to San Simeon."

"Crazy," said Penny as she snapped photos with her camera. She took in the mountain view over the temple front. "Man, I wished I lived here."

"By today's standards the Castle and grounds could be replicated for five hundred million," said Sheldon. "Rather than acting perhaps you'd be better off 'hanging out' at the university's IT department looking for the next Bill Gates."

"No thanks. I've already got a guy in my life I can barely understand," chuckled Penny as she nudged him with her shoulder.

"Yes, but he won't have a net worth sufficient to be labeled 'wealthy' until he claims his Nobel Prize," he said evenly as they walked to the front of the temple.

"Hey, just because I dream about being rich and famous doesn't mean that's all I want," she said defensively. "There's more to life than money."

"Indeed," Sheldon agreed. "Excuse me," he said to an older couple who were taking pictures of the statues by the temple. "I'm hoping you'd assist me by taking a picture of the two of us?"

"Certainly," said the man and Penny handed over her camera.

"I thought Mister Memory didn't need pictures?" she teased as the pair went to stand on the steps by the pillars.

"Doctor, and this is for you." Sheldon's glance lingered at Penny's face. "I don't want you to forget."

Without thinking Penny slipped her arm around him and stood close to her--to Sheldon--and practically grinned her brains out as she felt his hand touch the small of her back.

XxX

"--Aside from politics, William Randolph Hearst was also a significant player in publishing and communications," said Sheldon as Penny took a sip of her wine. "He entered radio broadcasting in the nineteen twenties and television in the nineteen forties."

"Anything with comic books?" asked Penny. "He seems to have his fingers in every other pie."

"Not comic books per se but his Hearst Metrotone News is widely credited with creating the comic strip syndication business. You might have seen King Features Syndicate on your Garfield books or on comic strip pages. That's his company. And speaking of pie." Sheldon removed his napkin from the table as the waitress arrived with his slice of pecan pie.

Penny watched with amusement as he took his fork and proceeded to count the number of pecans on top before tapping each side as if to calculate the angle of the cut.

"So you noticed my Garfield books on the shelf, huh?" she said as he took a bite of his pie.

Sheldon finished chewing before replying, "Read them, actually."

"When? I didn't see you."
"When you were in the washroom or getting changed."

Penny snorted. "Yeah but it's not like it takes me twenty minutes to change a shirt."

The physicist's fork, laden with pie, froze in midair.

"Penny, I read twenty thousand words per minute and have an eidetic memory. What I see I remember and all it takes for me is a glance and the image is fixed. For instance, if I had a pen I could draw out your erroneous soup tattoo." He ate his piece of pie.

"Yeah, let's not," Penny blushed. "So how's the pie?"

"It's good for it being non-Meemaw made."

"My Nanny also made them," Penny said wistfully. "I used to pick all the nuts out of them and eat them first and then eat the rest of the pie."

"Would you like to try a piece?" asked Sheldon.

Penny cocked her head. "You sure?"

There's a pause and then he pushed the plate towards her. Penny took up her fork and broke off a bit near the crust end and took a bite.

"Awesome!" she said as she chewed.

"As I said." Sheldon hesitated a moment before taking another piece of pie. The fork came to his mouth and, again, a slight pause before he took the bite. Immediately he went for his napkin and wiped his lips.

"So I take it your Meemaw baked a lot," said Penny.

"Any Meemaw who doesn't know how to bake isn't worthy of the title," Sheldon sniffed. "You can have more if you like."

"Looks like I'll never be a Meemaw. I'm lucky if I get Pillsbury cookies right," Penny smiled as she took another piece. "But I've smelled a lot of delicious things from your apartment. You'd make an honorary Meemaw."

"Grandsires in the Cooper household are Pop-Pops." Again Sheldon awkwardly took a bite of pie and then wiped his lips.

"And as we know you're the king of traditions," said Penny as she took another piece.

Sheldon's eyes watched Penny's fork as it came closer to his own end. In his estimation there were two inches between them. He could see Penny's fork tine marks on the pie.

"You can have the rest," he said at once and again wiped his lips, not noticing Penny's slight eyebrow raise at the tone.

"I'm 'good' too." Sheldon pushed the plate away and stood. "Excuse me, I have to go to the washroom," he said and dashed off.

Penny watched him go before turning to stare thoughtfully at the pie.
Penny sat on her bed in her pajamas brushing her hair and processing her day with Sheldon. The tour of Hearst Castle was a series of photo ops and lessons on architecture, horticulture and guests of the Hearsts over the years. It was like being with the Sheldon of old.

And yet it wasn't.

This Sheldon wore jeans and went to a strange restaurant and shared a slice of pecan pie although he stopped well short of where Penny's germy fork touched. Still, it meant she touched his food and maybe she should look at all of this as a gigantic breakthrough.

And yet he kept wiping his twitchy lips.

Sheldon was trying, and Penny appreciated the gesture, but if it made him--

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

"Door's open, Sheldon," she said and he entered wearing his blue plaid pajamas, housecoat, slippers and bongo drums.

Penny smirked. "Kinda late for a serenade don't ya think?"

"A serenade perhaps but not for a walk."

"In pajamas?"

"It's nighttime. Besides, we'll be on the beach where even scantier clothing is the traditional norm," he said. "Plus what's the point of getting you a room with a patio entrance if we don't use it?"

"Sure," Penny said after a moment. She went to the closet and put on a short silky housecoat she had brought with her and the pair went out the patio door into the night.

"Aren't you going to wear some sort of foot apparel?" asked Sheldon.

"It's the beach. No big deal."

"Hepatitis is a big deal." Pause. "Not that we should be talking about that."

Penny gathered her thoughts as they walked.

"I never knew you liked the beach," she said at last.

"I don't," Sheldon countered. "I don't like unfiltered or unchlorinated water or sand in my shoes."

"Isn't that what's happening now?"

"I'm beyond the reach of the tide and I'm wearing slippers not shoes."

Penny's stomach muscles contracted.

"Sheldon, are you sure you're alright? I'm worried," she said.
Sheldon stopped and she turned to see him under the moonlight.

"You're not having a good time?" he asked seriously.

"It's been amazing. I just--you're okay?"

"Am I okay," he snorted. "You make it sound as if I've lost my mind." He looked over her shoulder. "Do you know that the sun is four hundred thousand times brighter than a full moon?"

They continued to walk and Sheldon began rhythmically tapping his drum.

"Proxima Centauri's the nearest star. The celestial bodies that follow are: Alpha Centauri A, Toli, Barnard's Star, Wolf 359, Lalande 21185, Sirius A, Sirius B, BL-Ceti, UV-Ceti, Ross 154, Ross 248, Epsilon Eridani, Lac-9352, Ross 128, EZ Aquarii A, EZ Aquarii B, EZ Aquarii C, Procyon A. Those are the stars that are nearest to me. Tra-la-la and fiddle-dee-dee."

"What about the sun?" asked Penny.

"I thought Sol was obvious," he said, making Penny chuckle.

"What's obvious to you isn't necessary obvious, Dr. C., and most definitely vice versa."

Sheldon paused his drumming. "You're mistaking my disinterest in most things for confusion."

"So you mean you're not interested in me?" He snorted. "Because you sure got the confusing part down pat."

"In what way?" He resumed drumming.

"You said that relationships were yukkie and that sex was repulsive and yet here we are on a date," said Penny. "How logical is that?"

Sheldon sighed. "Penny, unlike you, the rest of the world doesn't just dive into a strange lake."

Now it was Penny's turn to snort.

"Let me get this straight, you're calling me strange?"

"I've never encountered anyone like you," he said evenly. "Your hippy-dippy ways and ability to drive marauders away with a baseball bat."

Penny laughed. "They don't sound like things that'd interest you." Sheldon turned his head to regard her. "I mean you're all about science and atoms and stars not actresses from Nebraska."

"They're not as dissimilar as you may think," he replied. "All the atoms that comprise life on Earth, even the atoms that make up the body of a Nebraskan thespian, are traceable to the high mass stars that went unstable and collapsed and then exploded scattering forth carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and all the fundamental ingredients of life itself. When I write my posits on the whiteboard or look up at the night sky I know that she's a part of this universe." Pause. "And she shouldn't downplay herself because the very universe we see up there is in her. In all of us."

"Sheldon, that's beautiful," Penny said softly.

"It's the truth," he said with a shrug.

"It's still nice to hear." They continued to walk. "It's kinda trippy thinking about all this. I'm a piece of forever."
"What do you mean?"

"I'm a part of the universe, remember?"

"Ah. But the universe isn't forever," Sheldon amended.

Penny's smile dropped. "What do you mean?"

"The universe's expansion is increasing and as it does it will eventually cool. Everything that we know, planets and suns and stars, will die out until all that's left are black holes and even they will eventually collapse and die. Then the universe will be a frozen nothingness for eternity."

Penny put out a hand and stopped their walk.

"Wait, you mean everything is gonna die?" she gasped.

"To everything there is a season," he said evenly.

They both turned to stare at the sky in silence.

"I can't believe all this will disappear," she said at last. "I mean I know we'll die but not this. It's too beautiful."

"Life is beautiful, Penny. And we're extremely fortunate that for the one instant in time the universe is alive we exist, a moment of consciousness, where we children of the stars can appreciate the wonders of creation—"

Sheldon unexpectedly felt Penny's hand at the back of his head pulling him down until their lips met. He wasn't sure what to do and so remained still and let his brain absorb the details of her soft lips and the feel of her hand in his hair and the sound of the gentle waves against the shore.

"Fascinating," said Sheldon as they parted and Penny laughed before their lips again came together. This time the physicist moved with her and before he knew it his hand went to her cheek but stopped short of touching.

Penny wanted so much more but reminded herself that this was probably Sheldon's first 'real' kiss so she should keep it simple.

They pulled back, breaths mingled, and their eyes locked and in that moment Penny felt the weight of Dr. Sheldon Cooper taking in everything about her. Rather than shrink away, she let him explore, hoping that she had whatever it was he was looking for.

At last his eyes dropped to her shoulder and he lightly bit his lower lip.

"We should probably get back to the house," Penny said softly.

Sheldon nodded and the pair turned back.

"Sheldon's walk-ing and play-ing the bongos," sang Sheldon as he beat away on the drums.

Penny tried to shush him but was giggling too hard.

"Pen-ny's try-ing to shush up my bongos."

"I'll show you shush," she said and tried for the bongos but Sheldon held them over his head.

"Is that Proxima Centauri?" he gasped as he looked over Penny's shoulder. The Nebraskan turned
and at that moment Sheldon took off.

"Pen-ny's cra-zy if she thinks she'll take my bongos!" he said excitedly as he ran.

Penny shook her head in mirth before dashing after him. She quickly narrowed the distance and began herding Sheldon in a roundabout way towards the house.

"Pen-ny"--he huffed and puffed--"will ne-ver"--another huff and puff--"catch Sheldon for his bongos."

"Oh yeah?" Penny said as she ran to his side and put her arms around his waist.Immediately he slowed to a stop and bowed over to catch his breath. Penny walked to his other side. "Pen-ny's fas-ter and owns Sheldon and his bongos." She gave a quick drum on the bongos and Sheldon glanced up at her, mouth open as he sucked in air and yet with an exhilarating joy stamped on his face.

"You think you're amusing," he gasped.

"Yu-P."

Sheldon stood and took a deep breath before the two of them began walking.

"Well?" asked Penny. Sheldon looked at her curiously. "The bongos chum." Sheldon took off the strap and Penny took the bongos and slung them across her body and began lightly drumming.

"So," she said after a moment. "How does your science-y stuff say the date went?"

"I have to go over the data," replied Sheldon before glancing sideways at Penny. "Although the initial results look promising."

"That's good," replied Penny. "So when will you know if you want to do this again?"

"I'm--not sure." Pause. "I don't want to make a mistake."

"Fair enough."

They got to the sliding door and entered Penny's room. Sheldon crossed the room to the inner door.

"Goodnight Penny," he said and departed.

He entered his room and closed the door before taking off and folding his housecoat and placed it over the back of the chair. He then sat on the bed, his mind retracing the day. Penny seemed pleased with how things went. Her eyes dilated at the sight of him in his hot and uncomfortable jeans and she got a kick out of simultaneously contaminating the pecan pie with their saliva-covered forks. Then there were the pictures taken in close proximity with unsanitized arms around waists and--I kissed her--then running across a beach at night where he might have garnered an infection or a cold. His hand went to his lips, his fingers gently touching them.

Without a doubt he knew he was going insane.

He also knew he couldn't stop.

xTBBTx

Entropy talk: understandinguncertaintyorg-another-look-entropy
Sheldon's universe talk: Neil Degrasse Tyson, Carl Sagan and every show about the universe I've ever seen.

Hearst Castle Info: Hearstcastleorg
Raj came to the lunch table with tray in hand and scowl on his face. He sat down in a huff and paused before glaring at Leonard.

"Your roommate's an arrogant ass," he said firmly.

"So, Raj, how's it going working with Sheldon?" asked Leonard with a wide smirk.

"I never should have agreed to work on our dark matter--oh, I'm sorry--his dark matter project since I'm working *for* him not *with* him," growled Raj.

"Yeah, but you'd be punted out of the country if he didn't give you a job," Howard reminded him. He shook his head. "Believe it or not, Sheldon's the good guy in all this. Still crazy as hell but that's a given."

Raj gave out a deep, heartfelt sigh.

"It's just that he's all over the place. First we're designing an experiment to look for the annihilation spectrum resulting from dark matter collisions in space, then he's muttering things about unit cells containing two carbon atoms and making a flow chart of the third Matrix movie."

"Well he does like to multitask," said Leonard before taking a forkful of rice.

"Leonard, I don't have a problem with that. What I have a problem with is that he's wrong and too stubborn to admit it. We spent all night going over the parameters and you know what happened? Not only did he underestimate the atomic weight of the dark matter particle, but he also kept picking the peas out of the fried rice and positioning them around the chicken balls." Raj sighed again. "At this rate his project will be cancelled and I'll be on a plane headed back to India." He looked down at his plate. "Goodbye Beefaroni."

"Okay, I'll talk to Sheldon," said Leonard. "He's been kind of distracted since he went on his date with Penny. I caught him using a stick of butter as deodorant on Sunday while he was looking over his workbook in the kitchen."

"Guess the Shelbot's having some firmware problems," said Howard as he chewed his corn. "As Data proved it's difficult adding an emotion chip."

Sheldon entered the cafeteria and came over to the table. He sat and opened his workbook and read over a few lines before writing. Leonard looked over his roommate, noting the stubble on Sheldon's face and the dark patch under his eyes.


"Electrons move through graphene, act as if they have no mass," he replied and returned to his workbook.

Raj put down his fork. "Sheldon, I still stand by my equation."
"Yes, you should," mumbled Sheldon as he read. "It's correct."

The astrophysicist dropped his jaw in shock but quickly recovered.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"Admitting you were wrong."

Sheldon regarded him. "I did no such thing."

"But you said I was right!" gasped Raj.

"We agreed on that. Your conversation is redundant." Sheldon returned to his workbook.

"Anyways," said Howard. "Bernie and I are going out to Disco Night at the Moonlight Roller Rink in Glendale tonight. Any takers?"

"I'm up for getting down," said Raj.

"I'm not sure," said Leonard. "I don't think Joyce is a roller skating kind of girl."

"Hard to pilfer State secrets while boogying," mumbled Sheldon as he wrote.

"What are you talking about?" Leonard asked.

"Interior angle of a hexagon is one hundred and twenty degrees."

"No, I mean about Joyce!"

Sheldon stopped what he was doing and stared at Raj's plate.

"Lima beans are carbon atoms." He nodded and stood. "Lima beans are carbon atoms and peas are electrons and Joyce Kim is a North Korean spy." He darted towards the food line.

The table was silent until a low chuckle came from Howard.

"You know, every time I think things can't get much weirder Sheldon manages to find that extra level of crazy," he said.

xTBBTx

Penny came in the lobby after her shift at the Cheesecake Factory. Tonight's tips had been decent and she had the bonus of bringing home a caramel cheesecake that the busboy didn't sneeze on.

As she pressed the elevator button and entered she thought about bringing the cake over to 4A but thought otherwise. Since their date she'd only seen Sheldon at group gatherings and he seemed kind of distracted so she interpreted it as him trying to sort out his feelings over what happened. Amy was pleased as punch when Penny gave her the details but then things got a little weird a few days later when the neurobiologist called her up and had her go over Sheldon's behavior on the trip. After receiving what felt to Penny like a cross-examination she asked Amy what was going on but Amy gave some excuse that she had another call and promptly hung up.

"Well like it or not, Sheldon's going to the park if I have to--"

"We're not separating from the United States, Sheldon!" Leonard's voice.
"What the frak?" said Penny as the elevator opened on her floor. She went to 4A and knocked once before opening the door.

"Dr. Hofstadter, need I remind you that we no longer function under the Roommate Agreement," Sheldon spat back from his position by the whiteboard.

"'Sup, guys?" she asked as she took in the fuming physicists.

"I'll tell you what's up," snapped Leonard as he gestured to Sheldon. "Your whatever he is has lost his mind!"

"I'm not crazy," growled Sheldon. "My mother had me tested."

"Whoa, whoa, let's calm down," soothed Penny. "Let's start at the beginning. Who's separating from the U.S.?"

"Sheldon wants this apartment under sovereign rule," said Leonard. "He was working on whatever on the whiteboard while I was watching Babylon 5. He made a comment and I said this was a free country and here we are." He picked up a bunch of colored papers from the coffee table. "He even has currency."

"Sheldon, honey, does this have to do with the Roommate Agreement?" asked Penny.

"This is about sovereignty!" Sheldon countered. "While Dr. Hofstadter believes that watching third rate television and consorting with North Korean spies are--"

"Joyce is not a spy!" snapped Leonard.

Sheldon snorted. "You're right. She just happens to be interested in you right at the point you're working on a secret Government rocket fuel project."

"She doesn't know about my job," said Leonard. "And how the hell did you know about it?"

"I came in and saw a formula on your board while you were in the washroom," said the lanky physicist. "Perhaps it's lucky you do live in the United States as they now incarcerate rather than shoot people for treason."

"You're crazy!"

"No I'm not," Sheldon said coldly. "Here's our new pledge of allegiance." He gestured to his whiteboard. "Memorize it. Your citizenship test is Monday." Sheldon retreated to his room.

"That was weird," said Penny.

"You want weird?" said Leonard as he went to his computer desk before handing Penny a little booklet. "For you."

"What's this?"

"A passport."

Penny handed Leonard the booklet and cake. She sprayed the bottom of her shoes and went down the hall to Sheldon's room.

"Okay Sheldon, what's going on?" she asked as she turned the handle. The door was locked. "Sheldon," she said again.
"I'm not associating with people who cohort with spies," said Sheldon from his room.

"I'm sure Joyce isn't a spy," Penny cooed. "Come on, open the door and--"

"Why doesn't anyone believe me! Not Leonard, not you, not the FBI."

Penny blanched. "You called the Feds?"

"They seemed all interested. They always do until you ask them to follow up and then they patronize you. They didn't follow up when I sent them a bag of dog feces for fingerprinting that someone had left on my porch and they aren't now."

"Sweetie--"

The lock turned and the door flew open and Penny took a step back as Sheldon stood there with an intensity she'd never seen.

"You're my friend," he said icily. "You're supposed to believe me."

"Sheldon, I--"

"Wrong answer." He slammed the door and locked it.

Penny stood in the hall, unsure of what to do. After a moment she returned to the living room.

"So what do we do?" asked Leonard.

"We call his mother," Penny replied.

xTBBTx

"We should have done this a while ago," Leonard said cheerily as he glanced at his notebook before adding a beaker of red liquid into a metal vat.

"It's been a long time since I've flown a rocket," agreed Joyce as she poured the potassium nitrate into a measuring cup. She stopped and looked at Leonard's notebook before continuing to pour the correct measurement. "However, this is a strange way to make homemade rocket fuel."

"Well, it isn't completely homemade," said Leonard. "Although it is my own concoction."

"Really?" Joyce said brightly.

"Just something I've been doodling with," the physicist said with a puffed chest. "It'll really give the rockets a boost."

A knock at the door and then Howard and Raj appeared with rockets in hand.

"Afternoon sir," said Howard. "Mademoiselle. Got the rocket fuel made yet?"

"Just about," said Leonard as he poured in another liquid into the vat.

Sheldon came down the hall.

"I heard a knock," he said. He looked but there was no Penny and he felt a tad disappointed even though he was still mad at her for calling his mother.

"We'll be out of your hair shortly," said Leonard.
Sheldon snorted and went to the refrigerator for a bottled water. He noted Joyce staring at Leonard's notebook. His eyes scanned the page and he snorted again.

"I wouldn't waste your time memorizing that," he said. "The formula's wrong."

"What?" said Joyce. "I'm not memorizing anything!"

"Sheldon, what did your mother tell you?" Leonard reminded him with a frown.

"Be that as it may, I know that if I was a North Korean spy I'd make sure the formula I was stealing was at least usable," Sheldon said haughtily.

"Of course it's accurate," snapped Leonard. "The numbers look off because I've cut down the size of the vat."

Sheldon visibly paled.

"You mean you've mixed this?!" he said incredulously. "Leonard, your ratios are off!"

"You know Sheldon," Leonard said as he poured in a test tube of yellow liquid into the vat. "Just for once I'd like you to respect that I'm--" The liquid in the vat began to bubble. "--In trouble!" He picked up the vat. "Open the door!"

Howard ran to the door as Leonard quickly carried the vat out of the apartment.

"Looks like you'll disappoint your superiors," Sheldon said to Joyce, who narrowed her eyes and glared in response.

"Come on, come on," muttered Leonard as he waited for the elevator. As soon as it opened his eyes widened. "Penny?!" he gasped as he saw his neighbor. "Get out of there!"

"Leonard wha--"

Sheldon darted out of the apartment and pushed Penny aside before taking the vat from Leonard and placing it inside the elevator. He then pressed the down button and slipped out before the doors closed. Without missing a beat he forcibly pushed Penny to her door and covered her body with his own.

A blast came from the elevator followed by smoke.

Sheldon stood back to regard his neighbor.

"You're alright?" he asked softly. Penny nodded dumbly. He turned and walked past Howard and Leonard. "You're welcome," he said crisply and entered his apartment.

"What the hell happened?" Penny sputtered.

"You mean besides a Federal crime?" Howard said hoarsely.

"Not in the hall!" said Leonard and he pushed Howard and Raj into the apartment and closed the door.

"Nice try," said Penny as she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Penny, it's best if you're not involved," said Leonard.
"You tried to blow me up. I'm involved," said the Nebraskan firmly.

"Look, as long as we don't say anything we can pretend it was some kind of pipe bomb or something." Leonard began to pace. "We all have to agree we were in the apartment and didn't see a thing."

"You all saved my butt with the Rover so I'm in," said Howard. They turned to Raj, who nodded.

"Penny?" Leonard pleaded.

"I suppose," she said.

"Great. Joyce?" Leonard looked around the apartment. "Joyce? You can come out. We didn't die." Silence greeted him so Leonard went down the hall. "Joyce?"

A moment later he returned, his face ashen.

"She's gone! Oh my God she's going to tell someone!" moaned Leonard.

"She won't say a word," Sheldon said evenly as he went to the refrigerator for another bottled water. "I'll blow her cover." He picked up his first bottle by the neck, making sure not to touch the base. "I suggest you dispose of your instruments somewhere other than the garbage disposal. Latex gloves are in the washroom so you won't leave fingerprints." He turned and went to his bedroom.

"You heard the man, Leonard," said Howard with a clap of the hands. "Get moving before Kim Jong-il sends his enforcers."

Leonard glared before dashing to the sink and began to run the dish water.

As Penny walked up the stairs she could hear people descending.

"At least we've still got comic book night," said Howard cheerily.

"That's right," replied Raj equally as enthusiastic. "Remember it's bros before--" He spotted Penny come around the corner and clamped his mouth shut.

"Hey guys," said Penny. "Where's Sheldon?"

"He's not coming," said Leonard in a low key tone. "He's too busy working on something he's been stuck on."

"Ah." The Nebraskan smiled sympathetically at her neighbor. "You okay since Joyce broke up with you?"

"She didn't dump me," Leonard said with a frown before his bravado left and his shoulders slumped. "She defected."

Penny's eyes widened. "Seriously? You mean Sheldon was right?"

"Can we not discuss this?" Leonard sighed.

"Sure," said Penny. "Um, have a good time."

The three friends slipped past her and Penny continued to make her way to her floor. She
automatically went to 4A and knocked out her incomplete shave-and-a-haircut and opened the door. Inside she spotted Sheldon staring at his whiteboard. It'd been four days since she'd seen him as work got crazy and Leonard thought it best she stay away in case Homeland Security raided the apartment.

"Sheldon?" she said. No response. She sprayed her feet and stepped inside. "Honey, it's new comic book night."

"No time," he said distractedly. He moved to the whiteboard and changed a number and stepped back.

"Okay well I'll--"

"No, no, no!" He went back and erased what he'd done and put in another number. "Hexagonal, Dr. Cooper. It's always hexagonal. Quit being so stupid and think!"

"Maybe you should take a break," Penny said soothingly. Sheldon snorted and turned to face her. in that moment her stomach tightened as he appeared disheveled with stubble on his face and looking positively exhausted. "How 'bout you take a nap or something? You look wiped."

"Can't. The pattern is the same as fermions."

Penny had no idea what he was doing; all she knew was that it had to stop.

"Sheldon, when's the last time you slept?"

"I had four hours sleep Sunday night."

"Sweetie, it's Wednesday. You need some sleep."

"No, what I need is an answer!" he snapped.

"To what?" she asked.

"Why electrons behave as if they have no mass when travelling through a graphene sheet."

"I'm sure if you leave it be it'll come to you." She brightened. "Ya wanna try some more Penny Blossoms?"

"No, the sparkles are too tiny to function as proper atoms." At once Sheldon's eyes widened. "Atoms!" He darted into his bedroom.

Penny shook her head. She'd never seen him this flustered before. Actually, there'd lately been a lot of things she'd never seen before. Gone was the awkward man who stared at her shoulder as he talked and in his place was--what? Sometimes Sheldon was all outgoing and whimsical--*He kissed me*--although there were times she could see how hard this was on him.

The physicist returned with a purple sack in hand.

"What I need is to visualize the atoms." He opened the bag and dumped marbles on the floor.

"Sheldon, what the hell?!" gasped Penny as she watched marbles scatter in every direction.

Immediately Sheldon dropped down to his hands and knees and began organizing the different sized marbles into hexagonal patterns.

She went to her friend's side and crouched.
"Moonpie, please go to bed," she said softly.

"Just let me figure this out first," he replied, his eyes not wavering from the marbles as he aligned them.

Penny took in his hands' frenzied work before reaching out and grabbing them.

"Sheldon!"

"Let me do this!" he hissed. "I'm a physicist. I theorize. It's what I do." She released his hands and he went back to work. "The pattern is the same as fermions."

After a moment to regard him Penny stood and exited the apartment.


XxX

At the knock at her door Penny paused her Sex and the City dvd and went to answer.

"Can I stay here a while?" asked Leonard. "I'll read some comic books or something."

"Why?" asked Penny even as she stood back to let him enter.

"Sheldon's crashed on the living room floor and I don't want to disturb him."

Penny returned to the couch and sat, turning off her television as Leonard settled himself at the other end of the couch. "He said he hadn't slept since Sunday."

"That's probably accurate," said Leonard. "I was getting ready to slip some Lunesta into a glass of milk if this went on much longer."

"Yeah," Penny said with a pensive look.

"Penny, I--"

"I'm worried, Leonard."

A crooked smile cocked his lips. "Took the words out of my mouth." He shrugged. "Maybe I should reinstate the Roommate Agreement, only...." Here he sighed. "Why is it so damn hard for him to just say 'thank you' when I do something for him? That's all I'm asking, treat me like a friend and I'll be one back." He shook his head. "It's like asking for the moon."

"It's nothing personal, Leonard," soothed Penny. "I don't think very many people were nice to him so he hides himself."

"Well it is kind of hard to like him sometimes," said Leonard.

"Frustrating to the point where I wanna pull my hair out," agreed Penny. She slumped against the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. "Leonard, if you met someone who was totally unlike anybody you ever met and you knew she liked you and you liked her would you go out with her?"

"You mean could I overlook the crazy."

"Yeah."
"I don't know," he said seriously. "There's crazy and there's bat-crap crazy."

"I know." She sighed and closed her eyes before turning to regard her friend. "Sheldon's never been like this before and I don't know what to do. Our date was amazing yet at the same time I could see that some things were really bothering him and yet he did them anyways. It's like he's fighting to be someone he's not and I just want him to know that I...."

"You?"

"I liked him the way he was," Penny simply said. "Don't get me wrong, he needs to have less crazy in his life but I thought he was stepping out a little at a time and that was fine with me." She pursed her lips. "This doesn't feel right."

Leonard nodded. "I know. Let's get him over this physics problem and then we'll sit him down."

Penny got up. "Come on, we're getting him to bed."

The pair crossed the hall and entered 4A to find Sheldon asleep curled in front of his whiteboard.

"Sheldon," said Penny softly as she tugged gently on his arm. "Come on sweetie, time for bed."

"Working," he mumbled although he did raise himself onto his hands and knees.

"You can work on this later," soothed Leonard who took Sheldon's other arm and together with Penny got the lanky physicist to a standing position.

Leaning heavily on his friends, Sheldon staggered his way to his bedroom where he was set down on his bed.

"Can't be in my room," he mumbled as Penny took off his shoes.

"Not now, Sheldon," she replied as she laid him on the bed.

"'Kay."

"Night, night, sweetie."

"Love you, too," he mumbled half asleep and then he was out.

Penny stared wide-eyed until she felt a little nudge by Leonard and the pair left the sleeping man alone. In the living room, she bee-lined for the couch and flumped down in Sheldon's spot.


Penny gave a little smile and he proceeded to take two mugs out of the cupboard.

"Guess Sheldon upped the ante," he said as he took out the tea and two loose tea holders.

"A little bit," agreed Penny.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, okay?" she snapped. "I mean I like him but I--" She shook her head. "Leonard we had one date."

"But you've known each other for a while. Maybe he means he loves you in a platonic way?"
"He sure didn't kiss me like a brother," Penny countered.

"He kissed you?" Leonard gasped.

"Well, I kissed him. We both kinda kissed each other in round two."

"Wow." Leonard put the kettle on the stove to heat. "Well, mother will be pleased she was right about him liking you." He came back and leaned his folded arms on the counter. "You're his first girlfriend and Sheldon's fallen hard so whatever you decide be gentle about it."

"I'm not his girlfriend."

Leonard snorted. "I'm willing to bet you didn't kiss him like a sister." Penny made to speak.

"Besides, right from the start you had a 'mess with Sheldon and I'll kick your ass' vibe to you. Yeah, the two of you are friends but that doesn't mean he can't love you." He paused. "That isn't so bad, is it?"

"But it's one date and a couple of kisses," she protested.

"And tell me in what universe Sheldon would ever kiss or go on a date?" said Leonard. "I'd do the math but it could take a while."

Penny slowly shook her head. "Justin warned me I'd fuck Sheldon up."

"You didn't fuck him up. You showed him possibilities," Leonard said gently. "You showed him a whole new way of thinking and being that he's never had before. You're good for him and he knows it."

"He's good for me, too," Penny agreed. "Taurus and Sagittarius. Could work."

"I just wouldn't phrase it that way to him," replied Leonard.

Penny winked and he turned with a chuckle to get the kettle.

xTBBTx

Penny frowned as she heard raised voices. As she came out of sleep she realized that, indeed, she did hear shouts and that they were most definitely Sheldon and Leonard.

"Oh balls," she said and darted out of bed. She went out in the hall to see the door to 4A wide open so she went inside.

"Sheldon?" she asked. "Leonard?" She quickly went down the hall but as far as she could tell the apartment was empty.

As she returned to the living room a pajama clad Leonard came around the corner wheezing.

"Inhaler," he gasped and Penny rushed to his bedroom. Fortunately the physicist kept it on his bedside table so she readily found it and brought it to him. He shook it and took a huff. Once he let it out he sank back against the couch.

"Where's Sheldon?" asked Penny.

"He saw that the marbles were moved and he flipped out and ran," he gasped.

"Son of a bitch," growled Penny as she dashed to her apartment to get changed.
"I'm gonna kill him," she muttered while changing clothes although she knew that she was first going to give him a big hug and make sure Sheldon was okay. Then she'd most definitely kill him.

Grabbing her keys, she slipped into a pair of comfortable flats and locked her apartment before returning to 4A.

"Hey Shirley, it's Leonard Hofstadter," Leonard said, simultaneously slipping a t-shirt over his head and talking on his cell phone as he came down the hall. "Dr. Cooper and I won't be in today. I'm afraid he's pulling a Dr. Rothman. ... Yes. ...That's right. ...Yes, as soon as possible. ...Thanks."

"Pulling a Dr. Rothman?" asked Penny as Leonard put on his jacket and jammed his feet into his running shoes.

"Theoretical physicists tend to go nuts after a while. Dr. Rothman's shown up at work a couple of times without his clothes." He grabbed his keys from the bowl and they exited the apartment.

"You're kidding," Penny said. Leonard finished locking up and the pair dashed down the stairs.

"Theoretical physics isn't for the weak-willed," Leonard countered.

They went to his car and got in.

"So where do you think he's gone?" he asked as he started the car.


"Here." Leonard handed her his cell phone. "Call Howard."

"Seriously?"

"I'd say call Raj but, you know."

Penny sighed and dialed. *The things I do for you, Shellybean....*

To her surprise a gravelly-voiced woman answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi. Is Howard there?"

"Where else would he be at this ungodly hour?"

"Sorry about that but I really gotta talk to him."

"Just a moment. ... HOW-ARD! GET THE PHONE! … I DON"T KNOW WHO IT IS. IT’S A LADY."

"Hello. Howard Wolowitz here."

"Hey Howard it’s Penny."

"Well, this is an unexpected surprise. I—NO I’M NOT TWO-TIMING BERNADETTE WITH A FLOOZY! IT’S PENNY ON THE PHONE! PENNY! LEONARD’S NEIGHBOR! Sorry about that. So what’s up?"

"Leonard said Sheldon’s Dr. Rothman-ed."
"Dear God. He hasn’t turned into a super villain has he?"

"Of course he’s not a super villain." Penny looked to Leonard. "Right?"

"Put it on speaker," said Leonard. "Howard, I’m not going to work today. Penny and I will try to hunt Sheldon down and get him home. Just keep an eye out for him at work and call me if you see him."

"Fair enough," replied Howard. "I’ll let Raj know."

"Thanks," said Penny. "Bye Howard."

"Later, ma cherie."

"You got Amy’s number?" asked Penny.

Leonard shook his head. "She’s Sheldon’s friend."

Penny nodded and dug out her own phone and dialed.

"Ames? We’ve got trouble. … Sheldon’s run away. He was stuck working on something and he just freaked. … Leonard and I are looking for him now. It’s really early so he might be on his way to your place. … Sure. I’ll keep you posted. … Give me a call if…. Okay, thanks."

Leonard pursed his lips. "It's a trip but there's always the model train shop in—"

"Try the park. I saw him there a few times flying kites," said Penny as she put her phone away. Pause. "Leonard I’m scared. Sheldon’s never done this before."

Leonard shrugged. "As long as you’ve known him you mean. Doesn't mean he hasn't cracked before. When I first met him he was barely human."


"His autism."

Penny turned to her neighbor. "I just thought he was weird. I didn’t know he was that."

"As you know my mother’s a psychiatrist," said Leonard as he made a right. "One of her sidelines is autism spectrum disorder. I read a few of her articles when I was a kid."

"Man, I keep forgetting all of you guys are geniuses."

"Yeah. Between our Star Trek uniforms and comic book night the genius thing kinda gets lost in the shuffle."

"Yeah, kinda." They smiled at each other.

The next few minutes were spent in silence as Leonard made his way to the parking lot at the park.

"Where to?" he asked as they got out of the car.

"The central part. He flies his kites there," replied Penny.

The pair began walking the trail.
"If he's not here do we call the police?" she asked.

Leonard shook his head. "It hasn't been twenty four hours."

"Yeah, but he's upset." She looked to Leonard. "He isn't suicidal, is he?"

"I don't think so. Of anything he seemed dissociative."

"Meaning?"

"Not plugged into reality."

Penny snorted grimly. "Sounds like a physics thing."

"More of a Sheldon thing. It's part of what makes him a great physicist."

"He's that good, huh?"

"Yeah, he's that good."

They walked in silence until they got to the central park.

"I don't see him," said Penny as she glanced around. "You go one way and I'll go the other."

As Penny walked she pulled out her phone. It was way too early to call work but even so she had a sinking feeling she wouldn't get off her shift. From what she remembered the manager was grumbling about being short-staffed this week. She sighed in frustration. The best she could do was look for Sheldon before her shift and hope to hell Leonard or Howard found him while she was working.

"Crap on a cracker," she growled as she scanned the park. "Where the hell are you, Sheldon?"

XxX

Amy lost count of how many times she paced her apartment. She'd called in sick, which wasn't a complete lie since she was sick with worry. Besides, she had to stay here in case Sheldon showed up. Her apartment was far enough away that it'd be a real trek for him. Checking on Leonard's Facebook page, which had unofficially become home base for Sheldon's search party, she noted that Leonard searched Sheldon's room and found his cell phone and wallet so wherever Sheldon was he didn't have the financial means to extricate himself from his situation.

Amy sat at her harp and listlessly ran a finger down the strings. Her and her stupid idea to loosen Sheldon up. It was obvious that he was infatuated with Penny--How could anyone not be?--and Project Gorilla was supposed to be the means for him to communicate his affection. Amy thought they'd hit a homerun when Sheldon and Penny kissed but now this was an unmitigated disaster. Sheldon needed a little encouragement and Amy gave him the equivalent of shoving him off a cliff.

"Please be okay, Sheldon," she sighed.

XxX

Bernadette drifted over to Penny carrying a serving tray with dirty dishes.

"Anything yet?" she squeaked worriedly.
"No," sighed Penny. "Howard and Raj are at Leonard's trying to figure out what to do and Stuart posted that he told the guys at the comic shop to look out for Sheldon. Amy hasn't seen him. Work hasn't seen him. And this last hour of shift is taking too damn long!"

"Don't worry Penny, we'll be there shortly," Bernadette said encouragingly.

"I just want Sheldon there shortly," mumbled Penny and took her tray into the kitchen.

XxX

Penny and Bernadette came up the stairs and heard voices in apartment 4A. With a hopeful heart they entered to find Leonard, Raj and Howard sitting around the table eating pizza.

"Taking a break," Leonard said between munches.

Penny nodded grimly. "I'll be right back." She slipped into her apartment and changed into comfy clothes before returning. Leonard offered her a slice of pizza, which she took.

"So what's the plan?" asked Howard.

"Hit up Starbucks and keep looking," said Penny as she chewed.

Leonard checked his watch. "Nine hours before we can call the police."

"You guys don't have to stay," said Penny.

"Howie and I can look for a couple of hours and then I've got to head home since I've got class in the morning," said Bernadette.

Raj whispered in Howard's ear. "Raj can drive by himself and he's here for the long haul."

Penny smiled. "Thanks Raj."

They finished eating and cleaned up.

"Okay so the stores are closed so we should just roam around and see what we can find," said Leonard.

"Will do, commander," saluted Howard and Bernadette and he left the apartment.

Penny looked at Leonard. "If it's okay I'll ride with you. My car's nearly out of gas and—"

"It's okay, Penny," Leonard replied.

Raj gave the thumb's up and departed. On a whim Leonard picked up the landline and changed the message.

"If you are calling in regard to Dr. Sheldon Cooper please call Dr. Leonard Hofstadter at 626 837 8601. Thank you."

Penny put on a brave face. "Let's get crackin'."

XxX

An hour became two and then three and still there was no sign of the lanky physicist. Penny ran over his odd behavior since they'd gotten back from Toronto and wondered if she'd done something to cause all this. Suddenly he went from Awkward Pete to Hepcat Charlie and— His
lips began to move with hers and the kiss became that much more. Penny’s stomach made a flip. She’d find him even if—

Leonard’s phone rang and he hit the speaker button.

"Hello?" he asked.

"I’m looking for Dr. Leonard Hofstadter regarding Sheldon," said a man's voice.

"I’m Dr. Hofstadter."

"I’m Rob at the Kidzone on Gerard Avenue South. I found Sheldon on the premises and managed to get a phone number out of him."

"I’ll be right there! And thanks for not calling the police."

"My sister’s son is special so I know the drill when he’s having a bad day."

"We’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. Thanks again."

Penny let out an anxious squeal and proceeded to text Raj.

Even though Leonard was pushing the speed limit it seemed to take forever to arrive at the kiddy playland. They got out of the car and Leonard knocked at the door. A moment and then a short security guard with a modest pot belly came to let them in.

"He’s in the ball pit and I can’t get him to come out," explained Rob.

They entered the play area and spotted Sheldon up to his waist in colored plastic balls sorting them out by color on the ledge.

"Hey Sheldon. Whatcha doing?" Leonard asked gently.

"Building carbon atoms," Sheldon said distractedly. "Size ratio was all wrong. Couldn't visualize it." His whole body seemed to involuntarily twitch as he continued to work.

Penny slipped into the ball pit and made her way to him.

"Come on Sheldon," she said soothingly. "Time to go home."

"But I’m not finished," he replied, not wavering from his task.

"We’ve got the marbles at the apartment."

"Too small."

Penny looked helplessly at Leonard.

"We can go pick up some tennis balls tomorrow," he said.

"Need to work now," countered Sheldon.

"Sheldon." Penny touched his arm and he jerked away with such violence that he fell into the balls. Quickly he stood up and continued sorting.

"I’m a physicist. I theorize," he said, his voice a heavy Texas twang.
"I know."

"Molecular motion is responsible for major thermodynamic occurrences. Ice cubes don't form in hot water. The universe is expanding. Movements are randomized at high speeds. Carbon atoms are hexagons. Always hexagons."

Slowly Penny moved to him and wrapped her arms around his slender frame.

"It's okay, Sheldon," she cooed.

"No, it's not okay," he countered. He slumped against her. "It's far, far from okay."

"Shh."

"Penny, I can't find the answer," he whispered.

"Shelly, we've got to see someone about this," Leonard said gently.

Sheldon closed his eyes and rested his chin on Penny's head. He breathed in her apple scent before turning to his roommate and nodded his head.

Penny took his hand and together they left the ball pit.

XxX

Penny sat in the car beside Sheldon in the back seat. She was unsure whether she was exhausted, relieved or scared shitless about what was happening. Her eyes went to Sheldon who was quietly tracing out what she thought were math symbols on his left thigh. Every once in a while he'd mutter something science-y under his breath. She had tried to pat his arm in comfort but he jerked it away and recited science stuff even louder so she let him be.

They pulled into a parking spot at the hospital and Leonard and Penny got out.

"Come on, Shelly," said Leonard as he opened Sheldon's door.

Sheldon shook his head. "My board's at home."

"We'll bring it to you later."

"Come on, Sheldon," said Penny as she came to Leonard's side.

"I want my Meemaw," Sheldon twanged.

"I'll call your mom and we'll see what we can do but right now you have to come with me."

He nodded and got out of the car and the three friends made their way to the emergency room. Penny took Sheldon to a corner and sat him down while Leonard went to the desk with Sheldon's wallet in hand to check him in.

"I shouldn't be here," said Sheldon. "Hospital acquired infections kill forty eight thousand people annually."

"It'll be fine," said Penny as she looked to Leonard, hoping like hell he'd hurry up.

"I need to have my friend evaluated," Leonard said to the receptionist. "He's having a break down."
"Name?" she replied.

"Dr. Sheldon Cooper."

"ID?"

"Sure." Leonard opened Sheldon's wallet and blanched. "Well, I have his Justice League Membership, his university ID and an identity card for the new country he formed when he separated the apartment from the United States. Which do you want?"

"I don't want to be here!" shouted Sheldon.

Leonard turned to his friend who was now standing, his arms wrapped tightly around himself.

The receptionist picked up the phone. "I need security pronto. Code Grey."

"Sheldon, it's okay," said Penny as she grabbed his arm and didn't let go.

"Don't touch me!" Sheldon said hysterically. "Bacteria will compromise my immune system!"

The doors opened and two security officers came out followed by two orderlies and a nurse. The officers bee-lined to Sheldon and apprehended him.

"Let go!" screamed Sheldon. "You're infecting me!"

The nurse came over and Sheldon spotted the needle in her hand and promptly fainted.

"Let's get him into a room," said the nurse and the orderlies scooped Sheldon under the shoulders and half-carried him from the room.

XxX

The emergency doors opened and Dr. Stephanie Barnett entered. She spotted Leonard and Penny sitting in a corner and came over to them.

"Hear anything yet?" she asked.

"No. Nothing," Leonard said nervously. "I'm sorry to call you but I didn't know what to do."

"It's okay. Let me see what's what."

Stephanie went to the desk and flashed her ID before disappearing through the inner doors to the hall beyond.

XxX

Penny and Leonard sat exhaustedly in their chairs.

"I can't believe this is happening," said Penny.

Leonard put his phone away. "I texted Raj. I told him to go home and I updated the rest. There's nothing for them to do here." Penny nodded.

Stephanie emerged from the ward into the reception area.

"Sheldon's in on a seventy two hour psychiatric hold," she said.
"Can I see him?" asked Penny.

"He's sedated."

"Please?"

Stephanie nodded and the pair went through the doors.

"If anyone asks you're his fiancée," she told Penny under her breath. "Right now they're going to test him for possible causes such as a brain tumor or drugs."

"He's still getting his brain scanned for Leonard's mom so I don't think it's a tumor," said Penny.

"Agreed. They're going to call her first thing tomorrow just to make sure." The two women came to a stop outside a door. "As a question, you wouldn't know if Sheldon has a psychiatrist?"

"I dunno. He said his mother had him tested so I guess he did at one point. I'm going to call her after."

Stephanie nodded and they entered the room. Immediately Penny's heart broke at the sight of a lab technician drawing blood from a sleeping Sheldon. After a few minutes the technician gathered her equipment and with a sympathetic smile exited the room.

Penny went to Sheldon's side and gently rubbed Sheldon's bare arm. It occurred to her that the last time she saw it he was standing in her apartment with nothing but a towel around his waist. His hair was damp and towel-mussed--a look that she'd seen many men in her life replicate.

But no one was like Sheldon.

She tugged lightly at the hospital gown as if trying to cover his arm. Penny then brushed his long fingers, doing her best not to touch the leather restraint on his wrist.

"He's gonna freak when he finds out he's tied down," she said.

"Right now they want to ensure he's not a danger to himself or others," replied Stephanie as she came over to the bed.

Penny wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand, removing tears she hadn't noticed until now.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"He drove me up the wall sometimes but I really do like Sheldon," said Stephanie. Penny bent down and kissed his hand. "A friend of mine's working the night shift. He'll keep tabs on Sheldon for us." She placed a hand on Penny's shoulder. "Time to go home, Penny."

The Nebraskan nodded and looked lovingly at Sheldon.

"I'll see you as soon as I can, my honey."

She gently set his hand down and straightened the blankets before the two women left the room.

xTBBTx

"Ah want tuh thank yuh for lettin' me stay here, Leonard," said Mary Cooper as she finished her tea and put the mug in the sink. "It's been nice havin' a home tuh come back tuh every night instead of a hotel room."
"It's the least I can do," replied Leonard before taking a sip of his coffee. "Again, it'd be no big deal taking you and Sheldon to the airport."

"I can take you to the hospital to pick him up," added Penny.

"He was adamant he wanted no visitors," said Mary. "Ah don't want tuh agitate him any more than he is." She smiled. "We'll be fine with a cab."

"Okay." Penny looked up from her seat in Sheldon's spot. "Mrs. Cooper, I'm really sorry about all this."

"Not yuhr fault," soothed Mary. "Shelly's always been wound too tight." She shook her head. "Ah've always regretted not followin' up with the specialist in Houston."

"Well at least he's getting help now," Leonard said.

"Ah'm hopin' some TLC from his Meemaw will do the trick. The hospital's already contacted his family doctor in Galveston so there'll be someone tuh monitor in case there's a relapse."

"How long will he be gone?" Penny asked.

"'Til he don't need tuh be," Mary said with a kindly smile.

XxX

Penny looked around her apartment. This had to be the cleanest it had ever been under her care. She knew she shouldn't be nosy but she couldn't help it; all the while she cleaned she had her apartment door open so she wouldn't miss Sheldon and his mother coming back. She hadn't seen Sheldon since he freaked out and like hell she'd wait until he was back from Galveston to see him again.

"Now we'll get yuh packed, have some lunch an' then we'll be off," said Mary Cooper from the stairwell.

Penny darted to her door and silently closed it. She peeked through the peep hole and saw mother and son come up the stairs to his door. Penny's heart ached as Sheldon's shoulders were slumped and his eyes never left the ground even as Mary opened the door and gently guided him in.

Quickly Penny gathered a laundry basket and some dirty clothes and left it on the couch. She left her door open a crack before grabbing a magazine and settling down beside the basket and tried her best to read.

After an hour Sheldon's door opened and Mary and he emerged carrying suitcases.

"Let me just lock up an' we're off," Mary said cheerily.

Penny popped off the couch and grabbed the laundry basket. This wasn't the best plan in the world but it was one she was going with. She opened the door and made to step out before stopping.

"Oh!" she said in what she thought would be fake surprise but she didn't take into account her reaction to Sheldon who appeared absolutely lifeless. "I can go later," she mumbled.

"It's alright," said Mary. "We can go down together." They began to descend. "We're gettin' tuh the airport early so Shelly won't fuss about missin' the plane."
Penny's eyes flicked to Sheldon but the physicist's gaze was firmly on the steps as he walked.

"Missy will pick us up at the airport an' Meemaw's spendin' the night with us at the house," Mary continued.

"That's nice," Penny said.

They made it to the ground floor.

"Well, yuh take care an' we'll be in touch," said Mary.

"Feel better soon, Sheldon," said Penny.

He walked out the door followed by Mary, leaving Penny standing alone in the lobby.

xTBBTx

Entropy talk: understandinguncertaintyorg-another-look-entropy

A/N: I realize this is a serious chapter but I want to assure you that the story is just about at the end and that it is NOT a downer by any means of the imagination.

There was an excellent blog entry on Tumblr by Ode to Abigail (ragnaroktopustumblrcompost333539800771: 'I finally watched the Big Bang Theory today....') that talked about seeing 'The Einstein Approximation' with the sound off and closed captioning enabled. Sheldon's obvious distress was magnified tenfold and the way his friends seemingly downplayed his breakdown and infantilized him disturbed the writer. For her, Sheldon was going through a meltdown and there was nothing funny about it:

"In the absence of the laugh tracks, or any other indication of what the audience should be laughing at, the episode played out like a drama that seemed to confront disability in a brutally honest setting. Without the condescending laughter from the audience, Sheldon was the show’s protagonist. He was the one we were meant to sympathize with - his anxiety, his impulsive movements, the intensity of his expressions and his tumultuous behavior, in a setting absent laughter, became frightening." (Ode to Abigail)

Combining this interpretation with the s7 finale and Sheldon being 'overwhelmed' by change I realized that this wasn't going to be a chuckle-y chapter but one that's critical to the theme of my story--Sheldon's emergence into the world. Of course he has to make some compromises but there's a whole whack of difference between compromise and change. In this instance I tried to capture the consequences of changing who Sheldon fundamentally is (much as many have lamented we are seeing in the later seasons Sheldon) as opposed to having him adapt as he was earlier in the story. Perhaps my view is a 'potato potAHto' but to me there is a fundamental difference and I try my best in my writing to work with Sheldon and his idiosyncrasies. They're the reason why my stories are so bloody long: I want him to step out on his own terms.

Okay, enough of my rant. On with the story! *Lynn
Mythic Proposition

Reference to and dialogue from: 'The Einstein Approximation'; 'The Boyfriend Complexity'; 'The Wildebeest Implementation'

xTBBTx

A key was inserted into the lock and the door to apartment 4A opened. Sheldon took a breath before entering. He placed his luggage to the side, took off his shoes and sprayed his feet. After closing the door he took his shoes and luggage to his bedroom. He set his shoes in the plastic bin and laid his suitcase on the bed. There was no point fretting about the contamination as he needed to wash his bedding.

Two months was a long time between changings.

He stripped out of his airplane pants and put them in the bin along with his windbreaker before taking the whole kit and caboodle into the washroom for decontamination.

When he returned to his room he unpacked his clean clothes and toiletries and thoroughly sprayed his luggage with an antibacterial spray.

Taking up the luggage he went back to the living room and put it in the closet. Next up was laundry but before he did so he noticed some items on the coffee table. He ventured over and sat in his spot, closing his eyes for a moment before looking at what was before him. The binder was labeled 'Roommate Agreement' and he flipped open the cover to see Leonard's signature on the new agreement. Sheldon then went to a black velvet box and opened it. Inside was the Chancellor's Medal for Science.

Sheldon stared at it for a while before closing the box. He picked up the two items and proceeded to the hall only to stop in front of his board. Staring out at him were a flurry of incorrect and incomplete equations. He erased the board and wrote out the correct answer. It came to him while baking cookies with Meemaw that he'd been wrongly assuming that the electrons moved as particles through the graphene when in reality they moved as a wave. He'd explained the whole thing to Meemaw, who patiently listened to the entire science spiel.

*’Well, that deserves an extra special cookie,’ said Meemaw when he had finished and proceeded to roll out an extra big cookie.

Though they were all of the same batch Sheldon was convinced it tasted better than the others.*

Next up was the washing of his bedding. Although it wasn't Saturday Sheldon considered this a one-time measure since he didn't anticipate--Eyes heavy. Whiteness. Can't move--a recurrence.

He wouldn't allow it.

XxxX

Penny walked up the stairs in a mix of emotion. This was the day Sheldon came back and she really wanted to see him and at the same time she was--afraid? She hoped that Mrs. Cooper and Meemaw worked up some magic because Penny's last view of Sheldon exiting the building positively haunted her for two months.

She showered and changed clothes before grabbing her keys and venturing across the hall. Penny took a breath and then knocked out her incomplete shave-and-a-haircut.
Two knocks from in the apartment answered her and with a smile she entered.

"Hey," she said and proceeded to put on her apartment slippers and spray her feet.

"Hi," said Leonard, who got out of his seat. He looked at his roommate who sat on the couch watching television. "Look Sheldon, it's Penny."

"Of course it's Penny," Sheldon replied evenly. "Only she continues to annoy with her incomplete salutation. Besides, it's after her shift and we will be ordering Chinese food shortly which she usually partakes in whether she has the means to pay for it or not."

"Yeah thanks," Penny chuckled as she sat on the couch.

"I'm just going to--yeah." Leonard smiled awkwardly and went to his room.

"So," Penny began. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm well if that's what you're asking," replied Sheldon. "You?"

"I'm okay. Better now that you're back. You really had me worried."

"I apologize."

Penny moved a cushion over. "No need for sorries, Sheldon. I'm just sorry you went through this."

"Yes, well, I've moved on," he said stiffly. "I'd prefer if we didn't dwell on the past."

"Sure, sure." She did her best to catch his eyes but they were firmly fixed on her shoulder. "So anyways, I was thinking maybe we could go to a movie or something."

"You have one in mind?"

"Nope. We can pick something when we're there."

"Sounds like a waste of time choosing the best of the lot as opposed to preplanning an excursion to a specific movie," Sheldon tutted.

"You know me, chaos one oh one," Penny grinned.

"That you are," he agreed.

Silence.

"If you don't want to watch a movie we can do something else," Penny said seriously.

"Tonight is Vintage Game Night. You may participate if you want."

"I mean just the two of us." She caught his mouth twitch so she reached over and touched his hand only to have him move it away.

More silence.

"Sheldon."

"We're still friends?" he asked.
"Always."

He nodded and to Penny seemed relieved.

"Sheldon," Penny said gently. "I'll take you any way you'll let me."

The physicist's eyes flicked between her shoulder and her face before he turned to the hall.

"Leonard," he called out. "Penny and I are ready to order. Unless you've changed your menu I'll order the usual for you."

"The usual's fine," said Leonard, who appeared a moment later.

"Very good," said Sheldon who leaned over to pick up the phone.

Leonard caught the pained look on Penny's face but when he raised an eyebrow in enquiry she shook her head no and he let it be.

He knew he couldn't walk on eggshells around Sheldon forever.

But tonight he would.

xTBBTx

Penny was stretched on her couch in her comfy pants watching television although to be honest she really wasn't focused on the program.

She was glad that Sheldon got a grip on himself but it felt like he put up more barriers than he needed to. Sure, she was glad to see the poop chart back on the refrigerator and, yeah, having Vintage Game Night and Chinese food was okay. The change was something deeper as if Sheldon thought that having control over his life meant not having a life again. She snorted. Well, at least they were friends so that wasn't too bad.

It just wasn't what she wanted.

"Dr. Sheldon Cooper, heartbreaker," she chuckled wryly.

Her phone rang and she picked it up, her eyebrows rising in surprise at the caller.

"Hello?" Penny said.

"Hi. I don't know if you remember me but my name's Alex and we met at the Thirty Under Thirty People party."

"Oh, hi! What's up?"

"I was hoping I could email you a script to look at."

Penny's heart skipped a beat.

"Is it for that show you were trying for?" she asked, hoping to keep her voice nonchalant.

"Just got the go-ahead from Discovery."

"Discovery?"

"The channel. They'll be running the show."
"Ah."

Alex chuckled. "I have a feeling that the script will be a little different than what you're used to since it's a reality show."

"O-kay. So what would I be doing? And if you say lounging around a pool waiting for a bachelor to come get me I'm hanging up," Penny said lightly.

"How about hosting a show where you get to shoot and blow things up?"

"And no bikinis."

Alex laughed. "No, no bikinis. You'd be a host and assistant to a couple of science-y guys as they check out things like urban legends and see if they're plausible."

"I dunno if I can do the science stuff."

"Penny, I'm not asking you to mix rocket fuel. ... What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"I just need someone who can handle herself around firearms and I have a feeling that someone coming from Nebraska won't have a problem with that."

"Nope."

"You'll be asking things that the laypeople want to know about the science. ... So, are you interested or do I need to twist your arm further?"

This was the first serious offer Penny had received. True, she'd already done a feature film but as it never aired she didn't count it. Not that she'd count 'Serial Apeist' even if it did.

"Sure," she said brightly. "I'll text you my email addy," she said as she typed.

"Terrific! I'll send you a link to the promo website. Don't be mad that you're already on it."

Penny laughed. "You're sure of yourself aren't you?"

"When it's important I get what I want. I'll give you a shout in a week while you look over the script and we'll have you in to the workshop to meet the guys. Sound good?"

"Sounds great. Thanks Alex."

Penny hung up and clicked the link to the website and read the title.

"Mythbusters. Cool."

xTBBTxx

Penny's feet pounded on the trail as she jogged her way through the park. Ever since her call with Alex she made it a point to run daily in order to get herself into shape. Not that she had let herself go but she felt she needed some color and better tone, especially since she was going to be on television.

"Television!" she squealed.

She made her turn into the park proper and in the distance saw a kite in the air. As she approached
the familiar figure of Sheldon came into focus, standing his ground while his kite made an aerial assault on the sky.

With an extra kick she picked up her pace and went down the grassy hill towards the lanky physicist. This was what he did to have fun and she wanted to bear witness to it if nothing else.

"Hey Sheldon," she said cheerily.

"Penny," he replied, his eyes firmly on his kite.

"Great day for kite flying, huh?"

"The temperature is moderate, there's an adequate amount of cloud to counteract the sun and the wind is from the north at fifteen miles per hour." He adjusted his lines and the kite made a flip. "It adequately meets my needs."

"Which from you is great praise," said Penny with a smirk.

"I'm not unhappy."

A frown came to the Nebraskan's face. She wanted 'happy' not neutral.

"So how long have you been flying kites?" she asked, trying another approach.

"Since I was five although Pop-Pop took me out to the beach to watch people fly kites when I was younger." The kite made first one turn, then another, before returning to its original position.

"Let me guess, you read about Ben Franklin."

"You've heard of him. I'm impressed," Sheldon said evenly.

"Hey, I did pay attention sometimes in class, y'know," Penny chuckled. "Besides I'm reading up on ol' Ben for a show I'm doing."

"You're employed?" he asked incredulously.

"Indeed I am," she said proudly. "And try not to sound so surprised."

"Fair enough," said Sheldon. "What are you doing?"

"It's a show called Mythbusters where some scientist guys test urban legends and stuff and see if they're true or not," Penny explained. "One of the future episodes has Franklin's kite experiment."

Sheldon glanced at his friend.

"I hope they won't have you flying a kite during an electrical storm," he said seriously.

Penny shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Penny, Benjamin Franklin's experiment is nothing more than an apocryphal tale," Sheldon said with a bit of a Texas twang. "I guarantee you he would have been killed if he did it."

"So how did he prove the electricity thing?"

"For one thing"--the kite made a series of loops and then hovered in spot--"Franklin suggested for safety reasons that the person flew the kite from within a dry area. This meant that the kite had to be flown from within a building, through a window. A daunting task." The kite did a tailspin and
then pulled out just in time and regained its altitude. "A more plausible explanation is that he flew the kite before a thunderstorm and collected enough charge from a cloud to prove the existence of electricity in lightning."

"Well, I guess we'll see if you're right," Penny said. Sheldon snorted.

"Never doubt me," he sniffed as the kite did another flip and a low loop.

"Watch it!" Penny gasped and to her relief the kite lifted high into the air.

"I already told you, never--"

"How do you do those flips and not crash?" she asked.

"--doubt me," he finished crisply. "I see your shortened attention span has the better of you."

"Just like your anal retentiveness has you," Penny countered.

Silence save for the sounds of people enjoying themselves in the park and the kite cutting the wind.

Walking backwards and looking skyward, Sheldon made his way to Penny.

"Take this," he said and handed her the right control string.

"Sheldon, I can't!" she gasped.

"Of course you can. You just did. Now the other." He forced the other one into her hand.

"I'm going to crash it!" Indeed the kite made a sharp veer to the left.

"Pull the right control line," he said evenly. Penny did so and the kite lurched far to the right.

"Now left."

The kite lurched to the left. Penny swore under her breath as the kite streaked towards the ground. Suddenly she found long arms around her as Sheldon put his hands on hers. He gave the right handle a firm yet steady pull and the kite righted itself. Then he moved their hands slightly down and the kite hovered in place.

"Pull the left control line and the kite will turn left," he said and demonstrated. "The right control line steers right. These are pull turns."

He released her hands and Penny moved the kite first one way then the other.

"This is fun," she said as she glanced at him with a grin.

"Now we'll do a push turn."

Again his arms enveloped her and she could feel his body pressed against her back. For an instant she closed her eyes before she felt Sheldon move her right hand forward. She looked skyward and saw the kite turning left.

"As you can see, it's the opposite," he said. "Pushing your right hand forward will turn the kite left and vice versa."

Penny gave it a try and the kite darted first one way then another.
"Wow that's fast!" she said.

"Yes it turns faster than a pull turn."

"That's 'cause it's easier to push something along rather than pull it kicking and screaming," joked Penny.

"Two scientific notes in one day. Penny, I'm impressed."

"Yeah, yeah." She watched the kite maneuver in the sky. "See? A few well-placed pushes and you go places where you've never been. It's fun."

"Unless you push too hard," he said seriously and pushed and held Penny's left hand. The kite did a complete circle. "And you end up right where you started."

"That doesn't mean you should give up," Penny replied, equally as serious. She felt his fingers take the controllers from her hands.

"Dr. Sheldon Cooper never gives up," he said and made the kite move end over end. "But he does know the limitations of his kite and is determined to fly within those limits."

"You know, Dr. C, for a guy who flies kites you really don't know a lot about them," said Penny.

"Gravity pulls all objects toward the center of the Earth," Sheldon said crisply. "Therefore other forces on the kite, such as wind, have to offset the basic pull of gravity which is trying to prevent the kite from flying."

"But you know why it flies?"

"The kite is positioned or angled in such a way to cause the wind to be split over the surface of the kite into two distinct streams of air, which is in accordance with Bernouilli's Principle."

"Nope. Because the only limit it has is the sky."

Sheldon turned his head to her and Penny flashed him a grin before turning away to resume her run.

xTBBTx

Penny walked through the parking lot at M5 Industries towards the grey building's entrance. From what she understood this was a special effects company run by Jamie Hyneman, who was one of the science guys on the Mythbusters project.

She opened the door and stepped inside to find a room filled with an assortment of gadgety stuff that she was sure the guys would get a kick out of.

"Can I help you?" said a young woman wearing overalls, work boots and a pony tail. Immediately Penny felt out of place with her capris pants and yellow peasant top.

"Yeah, I'm Penny. Alex told me to meet him here."

"Sherri. And yup, they're in the lab." The woman regarded Penny's flats. "Next time you're here you'll have to at the very least wear high top running shoes and pants. There's a lot going on out there."

"Understood." Penny followed the down the hall towards a door which had a green glowy sign for Muppet Labs above it.
The two women entered a large area filled with a vast assortment of tools and machinery. There were tables set up at particular stations where a couple of people were working on what looked to Penny like models of something science fiction-y. Over in the corner was a guy welding a metal contraption together.

"Penny!"

She turned to see Alex approach, his white slacks, cotton blue shirt and blue framed reading glasses making her feel less out of place.

"Hi," she said and the two shared a quick hug.

"Come meet the gang," he said excitedly and the pair came towards three men, two of which were smiling which made up for the third man's frown.

"She's not wearing proper attire," the scowly man said in a deep voice.

"It's not like we're working yet," soothed one of the other men. He flashed Penny an engaging smile. "Don't mind Jamie. He's a bit of a stick in the mud but he grows on you." He stuck out his hand. "Adam."

"Nice to meet you," smiled Penny as they shook.

"I'm Ben," said a tall man with dark hair and sunglasses on top of his head. "I'm the grunt."

"Cool." She turned her attention to Jamie, whose serious demeanor seemed countered by his walrus moustache and black beret. "Hi."

"Hello," he said evenly. "I thought this show was going to be about science?" he said to Alex.

"It's also television," Adam, replied. "The show can't just be about two fuddy-duddies like us."

"Hey, I'm willing to roll up my sleeves and work," Penny said. "I grew up on a farm so I know all about slinging manure and fixing stuff." Here she smiled proudly. "In fact I rebuilt my dad's tractor when I was twelve."

"She's also familiar with firearms," added Alex. "She might not be coming up with experiments but that doesn't mean she's helpless."

Adam clasped his hands. "Sounds good to me," he said enthusiastically. He nudged Jamie with his elbow.

"Next time wear sensible shoes," Jamie replied. "And welcome aboard."

Penny beamed.

XxX

"So anyways they're making a three hundred pound butt out of a copy of my butt," said Penny as she ate her Thai food in 4A. "Adam's really funny and is into special effects model building. We're at Jamie's workshop and I swear that man does everything." She took a sip of bottled water. "He even made a little robot like M.O.N.T.E. from a wok if you can believe it."

At this both Leonard and Sheldon froze.

"Jamie," said Leonard slowly. "You wouldn't mean Jamie Hyneman, would you?"
"You've heard of him?"

Sheldon put down his fork. "Have we heard of him. Penny, that 'little robot' you saw was Blendo, the first effective implementation of the full-body kinetic energy spinner weapon."

"After two fights at the nineteen ninety five Robot Wars in San Francisco Blendo was deemed too hazardous to compete by the event supervisors and the insurance company after throwing pieces of its opponents over the arena walls," gushed Leonard. "Blendo got co-champion status in exchange for withdrawing from the competition."

"Wow," said Penny. "Ben said it--"

"'He'," amended Sheldon.

"*He* is made from a lawnmower engine," finished Penny.

"So what's Jamie like?" asked Leonard.

"Intense." Here she grinned at Sheldon. "But when you're friends with Dr. Retentive here it's all good."

"That better be sarcasm," scowled the lanky physicist before aggressively taking a bite of his noodles.

"So why did they make a mold of your butt?" asked Leonard. "By the way, plaster or silicone?"

"Silicone. Adam said it's made from the same stuff as sex toys," said Penny. "Anyways, this fat woman on an airplane at altitude went to the bathroom and when she flushed the toilet she got stuck. They had to pry her off the toilet when they landed. We're testing to see if that's possible."

"Nonsense," sniffed Sheldon.

"Well, we're gonna find out," she shrugged.

"Penny, the toilet is designed to give off zero pressure."

Leonard held up his fork. "Hold on a second. Suppose it was someone like Mrs. Wolowitz? I mean she has enough fluff that she'd mold herself around the seat, acting like a fleshy seal."

"Suction would only occur for a few seconds at best and I refuse to believe that it would be enough to overpower someone's ability to stand," scoffed Sheldon.

A goofy grin came to Leonard. "Sounds fun to prove."

"What's there to prove? An airplane toilet seat by its very design prevents an airlock from forming."

"What if she forgot to put the seat down?"

"There are two lugs under the shroud that prevents the airlock."

Leonard shook his head in disbelief. "How do you know these things?"

"Leonard, where one evacuates one's bowels is almost as important as the matter that's being expelled. Toilets are like real estate. Location, location, location," tsked Sheldon.
"Let's say for the sake of argument that we can get a perfect seal. How much pressure could we generate?"

Sheldon cocked his head in thought. "Well, a standard airplane toilet is thirteen by fifteen inches. Given an average three psi negative pressure that would be four hundred and fifty pounds of pull."

"What's psi?" asked Penny.

"Pounds per square inch. It's the pressure resulting from a force of one pound-force applied to an area of one square inch."

"How do you weigh a pound of force?"

"The pound-force is equal to the gravitational force exerted on a mass of one avoirdupois pound on the surface of the Earth." Penny opened her mouth to speak. "An avoirdupois pound, also known as the wool pound, first came into general use circa thirteen hundred. It was initially equal to six thousand nine hundred and ninety two troy grains. Troy grains are--"

"I get it, Sheldon," Penny interjected. "Psi comes from gravity pushing on wool." His eyes widened in shock. "Okay, so how does the pressure stay at four fifty?"

"What do you mean?" asked Leonard.

"Well, she's stuck on the toilet until they land and pry her off," said Penny.

"Huh. That would dispel the pressure differential theory."

"Unless there was a toilet that provided pressure at altitude and on the ground. Which there is," Sheldon said enthusiastically. "Such a marvel of modern plumbing provides three psi negative pressure on the ground and eight psi negative pressure at altitude, with the pressure being produced by the differential between inside cabin air and the pressure outside the plane." He turned to Penny. "What altitude are they simulating?"

She shrugged. "All I know is that my butt's gonna plug a hole."

"God I love science!" gushed Leonard as he went to get a bottled water.

"Never noticed," she snickered. "Man, you guys take the simplest things and make it so technical."

"Penny, the show's premise is to prove or disprove myths via experimentation," sniffed Sheldon. "Your buttocks are merely a side note to the greater question of whether enough psi negative pressure can be generated to stick an obese woman to a toilet."

The Nebraskan chewed in thought before putting her fork down. "I'm gonna be an idiot."

"Why would you do that?"

Penny frowned. "Sheldon, I didn't get half of what you and Leonard were saying and I'm willing to bet Jamie and Adam are gonna be sounding off stuff like that, too. All I've got to offer is my butt and a smile."

"Penny, the question isn't that difficult."

"For you."

Sheldon set his dinner on his lap. "You lack scientific fundamentals. I'm quite sure if things were
Sheldon set his dinner on his lap. "You lack scientific fundamentals. I'm quite sure if things were explained at your 'level' you'd see that what they're doing is 'easy-peasy'."

"Could you help me?" asked Penny.

"I suppose, although using a future Nobel Prize laureate to explain toilet pressure is extreme overkill."

"Think of it as a rescue mission. Your task is to make me not sound dumb when I talk about science."

"That is daunting. But not impossible."

"Gee thanks," smirked Penny.

"I can't guarantee you'll fully understand the scientific nuances of how and why 'things' work but I promise you won't sound stupid," Sheldon said evenly.

"I guess." Penny stabbed at her food and sighed.

"Penny." She looked at him. "I promise."

"Thanks Sheldon," she said with a little smile.

A twinkle came to his eyes. "This will be the greatest test of my scientific career. Bazinga."

Penny picked up a throw cushion and whacked him on the arm.

Penny chuckled as she passed the plus-sized rubber mould made from her butt. Sherri had really detailed out the fluffiness, folds and creases so it looked about as realistic as possible. As much as she realized that she was nowhere near as big as the prop Penny nevertheless decided to cut down from two cookies to one at lunch.

The sparks from the welding torch caught her eye. She knew better than to stare at them but to be fair her attention was more on Ben who was covered in a workshop leather apron, gloves and welder's goggles. He made a final touchup and then turned off the torch.

"Hey," said Penny. "What ya up to?"

Ben raised the goggles onto his forehead.

"Building the supporting frame for your butt. They say it's going to be three hundred pounds," he replied.

"Just means there's more of me to love," Penny quipped. "How are ya gonna lift it?"

"Fork lift." He patted the frame. "Jamie's going to build something like a fish scale to dangle the butt off of so we can measure if there's any suction from the toilet."

"Airplane toilets are designed to prevent an airlock from forming," said Penny. "You'll probably have to take the seat off the toilet if you want to make a seal."

Ben smirked. "I never knew you were an expert on toilets."

*Thank you Sheldon!* "Where ya poop is as important as what ya poop." They both laughed.

"Although if we did get the butt to seal and the pressure to pull we could get as much as four
hundred and fifty pounds sucking on that tushie."

"That should keep me up at night." Ben grabbed the frame and Penny came over to take up the other end.

"Yeah, my ass does that to guys."

Together they brought the frame over to the forklift.

"Just set it down for now," said Ben and Penny obliged.

"How's it going?" asked Alex as he came up to the pair.

"Frame's complete," replied Ben. "All we need is the scale and we're in business."

"Just as long as it doesn't break." Alex indicated the toilet with his head. "That baby's eight thousand bucks and it's a loaner."

"As strong as a skunk's stench."

"Good." Alex checked his watch. "Well Sherri and Jamie are prepping the butt mold for the rubber compound that Adam's making so that's about all we can do for today. Adam said it'll take a day to set properly so you're off the hook until then."

"Sounds great," said Penny. Alex nodded before heading off.

"Lunch?" asked Ben. "I've got stuff to do this afternoon but I could use a bite."

"Sure," said Penny. They walked out of the workshop to a kind of mudroom where Ben got out of his work gear while Penny slipped into her flip-flops.

"Don't worry about being too glamorous. The diner knows all about us f/x people and our grungy ways," he said as he tossed a jeans jacket over his white t-shirt.

"Hey, don't knock the pink plaid," chuckled Penny as she straightened her top.

"No knocking here," he replied. "Even though I just spent the morning building a contraption to carry your sorry ass around."

"Does that make you my Prince Charmin?" she asked innocently.

"I'm not flush but I do have a throne you can sit on," he winked back. He opened the door and they went into the hall.

"Insert groan here."

"Hey, you started it." Ben grinned.

"And I always finish pissing contests," Penny warned as they exited the building.

"I can write my name in the snow," Ben sniffed.

"I can hogtie and castrate a calf in under sixty seconds," Penny said sweetly.

Ben laughed. "Remind me never to piss you off."

xTBBTx
Penny picked up her ringing phone and smiled at the caller.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey girlie."

"Hi daddy! I thought you were mom."

"She's over at Hailey's doing some quilting."

Penny smiled. That's what mom always said when she went out to smoke pot.

"She tells me that your show's going okay," Wyatt continued.

"It's awesome! We stuck my butt to an airplane toilet, made biscuit dough bazookas in a hot car and ran a beanbag body through a plexiglass window."

"Sounds like frat boy stuff."

"Believe it or not it's science, dad. For instance, it's possible for a hundred and sixty pound man to smash through a twenty fourth floor window by running ten feet at five point seven miles per hour."

"I'll make a note not to do that."

"Next up we're gonna see if we can take out an airplane window with a bullet."

"Let me know the next time we go duck hunting."

"Yeah yeah."

"Seriously, I'm glad for you, pumpkin. This sounds like a solid tv show."

"Thanks dad."

"Ya mind if your old man comes to get a backstage tour?"

Penny brightened. "You mean come here? Sure!"

"It'll give me a chance to see ya and what you're doing. And meet your boyfriend of course."

Penny's smile vanished.

"How's the good Doctor doing, anyways?" Wyatt continued. "Hope he's not too busy to catch a game or something."

"He's fine. Uh, I guess I forgot to tell you that Sheldon and I had a fight and, uh--"

"Aw, pumpkin, don't tell me you broke up with him?"

The disappointment in her father's voice crushed her.

"No! I mean we're still friends but we're taking it slow."

"But you're still going out."

"Of course we are!"
"Great," Wyatt said in a relieved tone. "Then I guess I'll see the both of ya when I get there. Next Tuesday to Monday okay? I've got a good deal on a one week flight."

"Sounds great."

"Then I'll see ya next week."

"Counting the minutes. Bye daddy."

Penny hung up the phone and flumped against the couch.

"Oh balls...."

Penny took a big breath before knocking at 4A. She had no idea how she got herself into these messes but nevertheless she wasn't going to disappoint her dad. Her 'external locus' wouldn't have that.

She opened the door to find Sheldon sitting on the couch with two whiteboards nearby with what looked like three checker boards forming a triangle drawn on them.

"Hey Sheldon," she said as she put on her slippers and sprayed her feet. "Where is everybody?"

"I'm right here. As for the rest of the traitorous bunch they're over at Koothrappali's place," he replied as he studied the three chess boards on the coffee table. "Apparently Priya's in town."

"Ah. Not a fan."

"Not really, no."

"Fair enough." She sat beside him on the couch. "Whatcha doing?"

"Inventing three person chess." He made to move a piece before hesitating and returning his hand back to his lap.

"O-kay."

Sheldon slid a rook three spaces before getting up and moving to Leonard's chair.

"So anyways, I've got the next script," she said. "We're gonna test if a bullet can tear a plane apart if ya fire it in the plane."

"You mean you're testing if explosive decompression is possible."

"Sure."

"Well," he studied the board. "To understand decompression one must know about cabin pressurization."

"Shoot."

"Pressurization becomes necessary at altitudes above twelve thousand five hundred feet above sea level to protect crew and passengers from the risk of a number of physiological problems caused by the low outside air pressure such as hypoxia, altitude sickness, decompression sickness or barotrauma." Sheldon moved a chess piece and then went to the computer chair that was placed before another chess board.
"For an aircraft planning to cruise at forty thousand feet the cabin altitude is programmed to rise gradually from the altitude of the airport of origin to around a maximum of eight thousand feet and to then reduce gently during descent until it matches the ambient air pressure of the destination." He picked up a wizard figure off the table and made to move it before a frown covered his brow.

"Why don't they just set it at sea level?" asked Penny as Sheldon got up and went to the whiteboard.

"Some airfields are higher than sea level." He corrected some words on the board. "And there are design limits on the fuselage. Now, any failure of cabin pressurization above ten thousand feet requires an emergency descent to eight thousand feet while maintaining terrain clearance--not crashing--and the deployment of an oxygen mask."

Sheldon returned to the computer chair and moved the wizard. "What you're testing is the possibility of a catastrophic loss of airframe integrity or explosive decompression from a bullet hole." He went back to his spot on the couch.

"Any predictions?" asked Penny.

"Aircraft fuselages are designed with ribs to prevent tearing. The size of the hole is one of the factors that determines the speed of decompression and a bullet hole is too small to cause rapid decompression," he said evenly. "This also rules out the possibility of a small hole blowing a person out of a fuselage."

"Looks like Ben owes me lunch," Penny said happily.

"Ben?" Sheldon asked evenly.

"He works at the lab doing welding and carpentry and stuff. He's really cool."

"Much of this showmanship could be avoided if you had a physicist and a whiteboard."

"Hey, Alex said you're always more than welcome," said Penny.

Sheldon snorted. "I'm on track for a Nobel Prize not a spot on a pop-television science show."

"Yeah, but ya get to blow stuff up," Penny chuckled as she got up. "Thanks for this."

"You're welcome."

Penny went to the door and changed back into her flip-flops. She made to exit but stopped. After a lungful of air to steady herself she turned around and went for it.

"Listen, I have a level one friendship request," she began.

"You already use my wifi and steal my milk," he murmured distractedly without looking up.

"No borrowing involved, I promise." Penny braced herself. "My dad's coming here for a week and I was hoping you'd pretend you're my boyfriend while he's here?"

"And why would I do that?"

Penny bit her lip. "Because I kinda told my parents that we were dating."

Sheldon straightened in his seat.
"Why would you do a thing like that?" he asked.

Penny tossed her hands in the air. "I dunno. They wanted to know that I wasn't alone out here and stuff. They already knew you were my neighbor and they were so happy that you're a doctor and it's no big deal."

The physicist turned to face his friend.

"I'm not comfortable lying," he said firmly.

"Please Sheldon."

"Couldn't you say we 'broke up'?"

"I tried but dad was so sad about it that I said we made up."

"I'll have to think about this."

Penny grinned "Thanks so much, Sheldon!"

He pursed his lips. "I said think not do."

"But to do not is to try." Penny winked and turned to exit.

"That's not what Yoda said!" scowled Sheldon as she closed the door.

xTBBTx

Author's Note: Jamie Hyneman and Adam Savage are to be taken as fictional accounts which in no way reflect on them as real people. They made a mock appearance on South Park and my portrayal is to be taken in the same light. Similarly, I am in no way affiliated with Mythbusters although the episodes I talk about are real. If you haven't seen Mythbusters you should check it out! *Lynn

Wikipedia: Pounds Per Square Inch; pound-Force; Pound (mass); Blendo; Adam Savage; Jamie Hyneman; Cabin Pressurization; Uncontrolled Decompression

Youtube: Mythbusters, Pilot 2 airplane toilet

Kite Flying: www.hiflykites.co.za

Principles of kite flying: bestbreezessquarespace.com

Ben Franklin: itsnotmagicitsscience.com
"Knock, knock," said Sheldon as Leonard and he mounted the stairs.

"Who's there?" sighed Leonard.

"Hugh."

"Hugh who?"

"Hugh listen to me, we're playing Aztec Challenge and that's final," the lanky physicist said firmly.

"Raj texted that he was going over to Howard for a fish brisket and he was a little queasy last time he had it. I don't know if he'll be able to handle the piranha pit."

"Life is full of peril, Leonard," sniffed Sheldon as he dug his keys from his pocket. "And as we know, fear is for the fearful."

"I just don't want fearful throwing up a brisket in our living room," said Leonard as they arrived at their floor.

Penny's door opened and an older man wearing a blue cotton work shirt and jeans exited followed by Penny.

"Hey Penny," said Leonard.

"Hi!" she said overenthusiastically before locking her door.

Leonard felt the older man scrutinize him.

"Are you Sheldon?" the man asked.

"No, I'm Leonard. He's Sheldon."

The man visibly relaxed.

"Good to meet you, son," the man said as he offered his hand. Sheldon paused and looked to Penny, who mouthed 'dad'.

They shook hands.

"You must be Penny's father," Sheldon said evenly.

"Call me Wyatt," the man smiled. "Penny's told her mother all about you."

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"Yeah, she said you're a physicist at the university. Impressive stuff."
"Of course it is or else I wouldn't be doing it."

Wyatt turned to Penny with a smile. "He's sure of himself. Nice to see it's for something other than entering beer pong into the Olympics. Which boyfriend of yours was that?"

"Curtis," Penny said stiffly. "Anyways, I'm hungry so if we're gonna--"

"Penny and I are going to the Outback for a good steak," said Wyatt. "Want to come?"

"A 'good steak' and Outback Steakhouse aren't synonymous," Sheldon replied.

"He's from Texas," Penny explained.

"A football man, huh?" grinned Wyatt.

"Not--" Sheldon began before he was cut off by Penny.

"--as much as hockey, I know!" she said desperately. Sheldon gave her a 'wtf' look and she shrugged.

"Can't say I'm much into hockey," said Wyatt. "Still, you must watch a little football?"

"I watched it with my father," said Sheldon.

"Say, since I'm here for the weekend, what ya doing on Sunday?"

"Sunday is train day followed by an afternoon constitutional."

"So nothing going on?"

Sheldon glanced at Penny before nodding. "The afternoon is unstructured, yes."

"Terrific," Wyatt said enthusiastically. "We can watch the game. Have a few beers."

"Alright," said Sheldon. "What game?"

Wyatt paused. "You're joking, right?"

Penny pulled her dad to the stairs. "Sheldon's a kidder alright," she gushed. "Later, guys!"

Once father and daughter were around the corner Sheldon and Leonard looked at each other.

"Wanna borrow my jersey?" offered Leonard with a toothy grin.

Sheldon rolled his eyes.

xTBBTx

Sheldon was in the laundry room separating his clothes into particular machines. Eight fifteen hadn't come soon enough. He hadn't slept well last night; as soon as he got comfortable and began mentally counting Meemaw's cookies on the pan the memory of an eight year old Sheldon sitting stiffly on the couch watching football with his dad came to the forefront and woke him up.

It had been twelve years since his father had died. Sheldon always found it ironic that he missed his dad even though there were a lot of things George did that he didn't like. When Sheldon wanted a centrifuge he got a dirt bike. When he wanted to do his homework, he was forced to watch football.
When George drank his parents fought.

To this day Sheldon remembered hiding in his room with his hands over his ears as George and Mary shouted at each other while the man was skeet shooting her collector plates off the roof.

Sheldon inserted his coins into the laundry machines and started them. He took one of the folding chairs and wiped it down with an antibacterial cloth before sitting. A frown came to his face and he shook his head. Penny's dad was not as rough and tumble as George but Wyatt was a beer-guzzling, football-watching farmer. Salt of the earth. What could Sheldon and he talk about for an entire afternoon? If it were about trains the physicist would have no problem, but football?

His stomach clenched at a worse thought.

What if Wyatt asked about Penny and Sheldon's relationship?

It meant Sheldon would have to lie and like hell was he about to undergo another colonoscopy. He knew that a lie worked best when it was detailed so as to make it unravelable. That meant he'd have to spend the evening working on it as opposed to working on his Lego Deathstar. He pursed his lips. Again Penny shattered his routine. Again he was forced to go beyond himself for her. For 'friendship' or whatever it was called when-her soft lips pressing his mouth-one had to lie for another.

"This is ridiculous," Sheldon growled and pulled out his phone and texted Penny.

SCooper: I can't meet with your father on Sunday.

A moment and then:

Penny: Y not?

SCooper: I can't lie about us for an entire afternoon.

Penny: Yes u can!

SCooper: No I can't. I'm not a liar.

Penny: Is there some way we can make this not a lie?

Penny: Scrap that. I don't want u doing something uncomfortable.

SCooper: So you'll tell your father we're not dating.

Penny: On Monday. At the airport. Thanx 4 trying.

Sheldon sat back in his chair and thought.

XxX

"So you're sure your mom will like the purse?" asked Wyatt as he clicked off the television.

"She'll love it," Penny assured him. "You know she's into this hipster stuff and the bag is made in Tibet so how can ya go wrong? Besides she loves coppers and reds and mustard."

"I'll defer to your judgment," he chuckled. "What say I make us some bacon and eggs tomorrow?"

"That would mean I have bacon. Or eggs," Penny smirked. "How about we go for pancakes?
There's this awesome breakfast place nearby."

"You got a deal."

"Great." She stretched, her sleep camisole exposing her belly button. "Well, I guess we should--"

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Wyatt looked at Penny strangely.

"That's Sheldon's secret knock," she said hastily before opening the door. "What's up, buttercup?"

"I have a document for you to sign," the physicist said and handed her a clipboard and pen.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Something that will fix our problem for tomorrow," he said evenly. She quickly signed and he flipped the page. "Now your copy."

"We still on for tomorrow?" asked Wyatt.

Penny looked at Sheldon who gave a slight nod.

"Of course you are," she said happily.

"O-kay. Just that Sheldon said something about tomorrow and-"

"No, no. He just wanted me to witness something for work."

Sheldon raised an eyebrow and mouthed 'liar liar'. Penny stuck out her tongue and passed back the clipboard and pen. The physicist handed her a copy.

"For your records," he said.

"Okie dokie."

"Well, I'll let you kids say goodnight," chuckled Wyatt as he got off the couch.

Penny and Sheldon stared awkwardly at each other before Sheldon stuck out a hand. Penny gently pushed it down and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered near his ear.

For his part Sheldon nodded before giving Wyatt a twitchy smile and departed.

"Kind of a serious fellow," Wyatt said as Penny closed the door.

"He loosens up when ya get to know him," she countered.

"Pen, I'm not quibbling. It's nice seeing you date someone who takes life seriously." Here he chuckled. "I mean the only other guy who gave me a serious talk was Donnie with his pig poop biofuel."
"Drop it dad," Penny said quickly.

"Just sayin' honey, it's nice," Wyatt said with a disarming smile. "No neck tattoos or outstanding warrants or children from multiple women. Ya did good, kiddo."

"Sheldon's once in a lifetime," she agreed before crossing over and giving her dad a kiss on the cheek. "'Night dad."

"Breakfast at eight tomorrow." Penny groaned. "None of this noon wakeup, missy," chuckled Wyatt. "'Night." He went into Penny's bedroom and closed the door.

Penny grabbed her comforter and pillow and got her couch ready for bed. A thought came to her and she went to her shelf where she had stuck Sheldon's paper. She hadn't had time to read it. Penny chuckled. God knows what I signed.

Her eyes scanned the page and widened:

*Abbreviated Relationship Agreement

This is a binding covenant that enumerates the rights and responsibilities of Sheldon Lee Cooper, here and after known as the boyfriend, and--*

"Good grief," Penny grinned.

xTBBTx

"How do you not make a first down there?" Wyatt growled at the television before taking a slug of beer from the bottle.

"They passed against a nickel defense," replied Sheldon. "They should have run it off-tackle."

Wyatt grinned and sat back in Leonard's stuffed chair. "You really know your stuff."

"Thanks to time spent with my father watching games and an eidetic memory."

"A what?"

"I don't forget things."

"Oh really?" Wyatt thought for a moment. "You remember that Thanksgiving game when it snowed in Dallas?"

"Nineteen ninety three. Leon Lett blew the game in the final seconds and the Dolphins emerged victorious. Then I finally got to do my calculus."

"Damn, you're a keeper," Wyatt said and took another sip of beer. "So how did you meet Pen?"

A twitch came to Sheldon's face.

"I was at Pasadena's most popular Irish watering hole, Lucky Baldwin's, talking with the fun loving but morally loose, Miss Maggie McGearry," he said carefully. "She spends her nights there tending bar, with a head full of curls and a heart full of dreams." Wyatt turned to him with a strange look. "Penny bumped into me at the bar, spilling her drink on my shirt," Sheldon added. "I still have the shirt, if you'd like to see the stain."

"Huh," replied Wyatt. "Kinda funny ya met there since you live across the hall. I would have thought you'd meet at the mailbox or laundry room."
"Yes, one would think," said Sheldon who gave a nervous closed mouth Joker grin before taking a sip from his bottled water.

"Looks like Dallas is really running the ground game."

"Actually, the defense is showing blitz. I'd throw a quick slant to a wideout," said Sheldon.

They watched the play and sure enough the wideout received the pass and rumbled his way down the field.

"First down!" cheered Wyatt who finished off his beer. "Time to reload." He got up and went to the refrigerator. "Want a beer?"

"I'm on medication," Sheldon replied.

"Then I'll drink for the both of us." Wyatt twisted the cap and sat down. He took a swig of beer and sighed his satisfaction. "You're alright, son. I can't even begin to tell you what a relief it is to know that you're dating Pen. She's always dated trash and when she said she was dating a doctor I assumed that 'doctor' was the street name for drug dealer." Wyatt raised an eyebrow at Sheldon. "You are definitely not a drug dealer."

"My mother told me to abstain from drugs," said Sheldon. "I don't even drink coffee."

Wyatt chuckled. "I really thought that Kurt was going to be the best she could do."

"Kurt is a few branches short on the evolutionary tree," Sheldon said crisply.

"You've met?"

"Three times. He had Penny's television and owed a sum of money."

Wyatt grunted. "I'll have to head over and collect before I go."

"No need. I secured both," said Sheldon.

"How'd you do that? Gunpoint?"

"It was just a matter of informing him that these could very easily become police matters if he didn't cooperate."

"You're lucky he didn't decide to do away with you and dispose of the body," chuckled Wyatt.

"That hadn't occurred to me at the time," Sheldon shrugged.

"Yeah, I did a lot of stupid things when I liked a gal."

Wyatt held out his beer bottle and Sheldon clinked it with his water bottle.

xTBB'Tx

Sheldon couldn't believe he'd forgotten. Obviously the stress of his afternoon with Wyatt distracted him because everything was out of sorts from his bowel movement to the extra time he had to brush his teeth because he'd mistimed the three seconds he took on each tooth.

He finished washing his hands and dried them on his Monday towel. This was not the way to start the work week. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water before reaching into
his pocket and pulled out a prescription bottle. With a pop he opened it and took out a white caplet and stared at it a moment before placing it in his mouth.

At that moment the door opened and Penny burst in.

"Okay, what did you do!" she asked excitedly as he turned his back and put the cap on the bottle and shoved it into his pocket. He scooped up the glass of water and held up a finger as he took a swallow.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he set the glass on the counter.

"My dad called you 'son'. He doesn't call my brother that." She sprayed her brown slippers and marched across the room. "So I'm asking you again, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything per se. We watched football and conversed." He made to move by her but Penny got in his path.

"Nuh uh. Details."

"Fine," sighed Sheldon. "We discussed football, how we met, how you have a history of dating unsavory men, how--"

Penny's jaw dropped. "Oh my God you didn't say anything did you?"

"I didn't think there was anything to say," he said as a twitch moved his lips.

"What did you say?" She lightly poked his chest.

"I merely agreed." She poked him again. "Stop that."

"Quit squirming and just tell me." She poked him a couple more times and he moved backwards into the refrigerator.

"This is assault!"

"Tell me." She poked his side and he flinched and in that moment she recognized a ticklish spot. She smiled wickedly and Sheldon tried to move aside but he was too late to stop her fingers from tickling his sides.

"Penny!" he giggled. "Stop that!"

"Not until you tell me what you said!"

"I just...said that Kurt...was a Neanderthal. ...And your dad said...he was the best of the lot."

Penny growled, both playful and embarrassed, and doubled her tickling efforts. She used her body as best she could to block him but Sheldon was bigger and determined to pass. He squeezed by and she grabbed at his housecoat and in the short tussle a clatter was heard as something hit the floor. She reached down and picked up a bottle of pills, barely having time to read the label before Sheldon ripped it out of her hand.

She blanched as she saw a flash of anger on his face. "Sheldon I--"

"Not a word!" he hissed and a moment later the apartment door opened and Wyatt entered wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt.

"Morning son," he said brightly. "Did you ask him about the coffee?" he said to Penny.
"Uh, yeah," she said weakly and turned to Sheldon.

"I'll put some on," he said matter-of-factly and went to the cupboard. "I'm unsure as to the amount needed so I'll make a full pot."

"Great. I'm gonna rustle up some bacon and eggs which we bought yesterday since my daughter doesn't believe in a hearty breakfast," Wyatt quipped. "Would you like some?"

"Today is oatmeal day," Sheldon replied.

"Alright. Penny?"

"Just eggs. I'm vegetarian, remember?"

"Penny, eggs come from chickens," Sheldon said as he put measured teaspoons of coffee into the filter.

"Grew up on a farm, Sheldon," she replied crisply. "Dad knows what I mean."

"I hardly understand why. You eat chicken and turkey without qualm and if I'm not mistaken--which I'm not--I believe I've seen you eat steak. To say you're vegetarian is to say that Rambo is a pacifist."

"It's the thought that counts," grumbled Penny.

"Tell that to the chicken," shrugged Sheldon.

"You know, I don't need this douchiness right now."

"How am I being a douche? I'm merely stating my observations. You live in a world of contradictions where eating meat can be considered vegetarian." He put the filter in the coffee maker and took up the pot. "Perhaps if you bothered to read something other than the Enquirer you'd educate yourself on the world around you."

"What did you just say?!" Penny snapped.

"I said--"

"I know what you said!"

"Then why di--"

"Because I can't believe you'd be such a damn jackass to say something like that!" Penny said loudly. "Yeah, you've got your fancy degrees, whoop dee doop." Here Sheldon's face twitched.

"You freak out like germs are gonna kill you, which is just stupid."

"Do you know how many people die from infection each year?" Sheldon said icily.

"I don't care! Now get your head out of your own ass and get out there and live life for fuck's sake instead of hiding from it!"

Sheldon and Penny scowled at each other before she marched out of the apartment.

"She's feisty like her Grandma," Wyatt said "A hair trigger away from getting it on."

"So I've noticed." Sheldon said matter-of-factly.
"Just don't give up on her," Wyatt said seriously.

"How can I give up when we aren't--" Sheldon clamped his mouth shut.

Both men looked at each other.

"You're not really dating are you?" Wyatt said.

"I have a signed document that says otherwise," countered Sheldon.

Wyatt smiled grimly. "And I know hooey when I hear it." He shook his head. "Damn. I was really hoping she'd picked someone decent. That she'd finally grown the hell up and quit being--"

"It's not Penny," Sheldon said quickly. He cleared his throat. "It's me."

"Son, I don't pry and I'm not gonna now."

"Thank you."

"Although any time ya wanna get over what you're going through and date my daughter that's okay too," Wyatt said lightly. "Just throwing that out there."

"Our friendship is tenuous at best. I can't see that altering our paradigm would improve things."

"Yeah, maybe you're too different for your own good," sighed Wyatt. "I mean it's a wonder a guy like you sees anything worthwhile in Penny."

"She has a lot of redeeming qualities," Sheldon countered with a frown. "She's amiable, loyal, physically capable, empathetic, kind, at times amusing, gentle--"

"You know how nice it is having a guy say my daughter's kind and capable instead of a nice piece of ass?" Wyatt interjected.

"She is aesthetically pleasing," Sheldon admitted. "But that's not what makes her Penny."

"Sounds to me like you two are just fine," Wyatt said before exiting to get dressed.

Sheldon pondered a moment and then went to the cupboard for his oatmeal.

XxX

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

"It's open," came her reply.

Sheldon entered to find Penny on the couch reading a book. He waited patiently as she turned the page.

"I can return later," he said and Penny raised her finger. A moment more and then she put in a bookmark and closed the book before tossing it on the coffee table. Sheldon eyed the cover, 'Two Weeks to Rock Hard Abs'.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Besides give me an apology."
"You?" he gasped. "You assaulted me."

"You called me stupid."

"I did not."

"'If yuh read somethin' other than the Enquirer yuh'd educate yuhrself on the world around yuh,'" she mimicked, emphasizing the Texas twang.

"It was an observation not a slight," Sheldon said with a frown.

Penny pursed her lips. "I'm not schooled like you but that doesn't mean I don't know things. They're just different than what you know."

"Penny, there's little that I don't know."

"Okay genius, so why did you kiss me if you only want to be friends?"

Silence.

With a sigh Penny got off the couch and approached him.

"Sometimes observations can suck, huh?" she said.

"Noted," he replied quietly. "I apologize."

"I also owe you an apology. I shouldn't have tickled you."

"Apology accepted." A moment and then he cleared his throat. "I have some papers for you to sign."

Penny cocked her head. "Sheldon, what's wrong?"

"Are you going to sign these?" he said crisply as he held up the clipboard.

"Not unless you tell me what's bothering you. Is it the pills or that I touched you or--"

"How ironic that one permits the other," he snorted disgustedly.

"I don't understand."

"While I was at the--when I was unwell the doctor prescribed medication to address my...condition," he said. His brows furrowed. "I don't want to take them but I promised my mother I would."

"The side effects are bad?" Penny asked gently.

"Fatigue mostly although I've noticed a minor impairment in my memory recall. At times I find myself...unsure." He pursed his lips. "It might be treating symptoms but aside from that I have no idea what it might be doing to my brain."

"Well I haven't noticed anything weird aside from the fact you're hiding yourself away again."

"I lied to my mother," he said quietly. "I'd stopped taking my medication." Here he lowered his gaze to the floor. "The resulting level of anxiety was unbearable."

"So you're back on?"
"I'm homo novus," he said coldly. "I shouldn't need medication."

"But you're back on it," Penny pressed.

"Yes I'm back on it, no thanks to you." His eyes met her gaze. "You ruined me."

Penny rolled her eyes. "Sheldon, you're not ruined. Lots of people take medication for things."

"I don't."

"Well ya do now and like you said the anxiety's gone down."

"I never had anxiety before this," he said with a scowl. Penny gave him a raised eyebrow 'yeah right' look. "Much," he added.

"You have to weigh the good with the bad," she said with a grim smile. "That's life, Sheldon." He looked unconvinced. "We're friend, right?"

"Yes."

"And Leonard and Amy? Friends too?"

"Your point?" Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth.

"My point is that if you'd never turned around and said hello there'd be none of us in your life. No comic book Wednesdays or that weird game you play with Amy or paintball with Howard and Raj," said Penny.

"But I wouldn't be on medication either," Sheldon pointed out.

"It is what it is, kiddo." Her face became serious. "You're not having problems thinking about your physics stuff are you?"

"I was out of sorts during the first five weeks due to a myriad of side effects including nausea, insomnia and an overall malaise, although to be fair they could also have been the aftereffects of my...of the incident," Sheldon replied. "I did manage to solve my graphene problem at Meemaw's while baking cookies."

"Give the meds a fair shake," Penny said simply.

"Don't tell anyone about this," he said after a moment.

"Zippo. Although it's nothing to be ashamed of." She lightly touched his arm. "Hey." Sheldon looked up. "You're still Dr. C. That won't ever change."

He nodded in relief and held out the clipboard.

"What's this?" Penny asked as she took it.

"The dissolution of our Relationship Agreement. Since your father's gone we can repeal the Agreement," he said, his voice back to its confident self.

"Thanks again for that," she said as she haphazardly glanced at the document before signing at the bottom of both pages. "Okay, that's that. So, do I get fifty percent of your comic books?" she asked lightly as she handed back the clipboard.
"Hardly," he sniffed. "We were dating, not married." He affixed his own signature to the documents.

"Eh, potato potAHto." She grinned. "I at least get your Green Lantern shirt."

"Why?"

"A memento of our undying love," she said with the back of her hand to her forehead.

"I believe the wrong person in this relationship is medicated," he mumbled as he handed Penny her copy.

xTBBTx

"So anyways, Dad said that Dr C's some kind of football guru, which totally blew me away since I tried to get him to a Cornhuskers party and he refused to go," said Penny as she sat on a bench in a concrete clubhouse tying her high top sneakers.

"Then why'd he watch with your dad?" Ben asked as he put on a checkered long sleeve shirt.

"Oh. That's because I'd told my Dad that we were going out and Sheldon completely bailed my ass."

"So you're not going out with him?"

"We're just friends," Penny confirmed and stood to put on a jeans jacket.

"Maybe it's a sign you need to be dating someone," suggested Ben.

"I guess." Penny shrugged. "Haven't really been out there in a while."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Burned or nothing interesting?"

"Option C."

"Which is?"

"Complicated," Penny said seriously.

"Ah. So does complicated mean we can't go for dinner after we wrap?" Ben asked slowly.

"As long as you're No Agenda Man we can."

"I promise to let you pay for your own food," Ben said with a smile. "If you want it to be less of a date you can pay for mine, too."

"Gee thanks," Penny said and stuck out her tongue.

Alex opened the door. "Okay, we're ready."

Ben clapped his hands enthusiastically. "Time to blow shit up."

Penny put her goggles on. "If it bleeds we can kill it," she agreed.

Ben was impressed. "Predator?"

"Where the hell did that come from?" gasped Penny.
"Howard, check the equatorial mount on the laser," said Sheldon as he made a note on the clipboard.

"I've already checked and rechecked," snapped Howard. "I'm an engineer. I know how to mount a laser on a tripod."

"And one would expect know how to flush a toilet but as we've witnessed when your mother's meatloaf attached itself to my ceiling that's not necessarily the case."

Leonard looked up from the computer and control panel.

"Howard, better do as he says. He's only going to get grumpier."

"Whatever," growled Howard as he stomped across the roof to the laser. "This would be so much easier if Penny was here to distract him."

"Actually it's been a while since I've seen Penny," said Raj as he checked over the photomultiplier. "I miss our talks."

"Since when did you talk to her?" asked Howard.

"We talked plenty of times," Raj said defensively. "Mind you I was drinking and don't remember everything we said but nevertheless it meant a lot to me."

"Yes, well, Penny has a career now so we've got to respect her new responsibilities," said Leonard.

"She has a gig, hardly a 'career'," Sheldon said distractedly. "She still works the evening shift at the Cheesecake Factory."

"Well she doesn't tonight," Leonard snapped. "In fact I invited her to see this and she said yes."

Sheldon crossed to the control panel and clicked a few buttons.

"What she says doesn't reflect our current situation as she's not here," he countered.

As if to mock him the sound of Penny's high pitched laugh echoed in the stairwell along with a man's chuckle. Leonard turned to Sheldon but the lanky physicist continued to stare intensely at the computer monitor.

"You're whacked," giggled Penny as she stepped onto the roof followed by her companion.

"Hey Penny," smiled Leonard. "Glad you could make it."

"Yeah, sorry we're late. Ben had to finish filling a blow up doll with green gel and, well, you'll have to see it when it airs."

"Actually gels work wonders," said Howard. "You can warm it while it's in the doll."

"You must be Howard," smiled Ben.

"I see my reputation precedes me," bowed the engineer.

"The mount is secure?" asked Sheldon in a matter-of-fact voice.
"Yes, Sheldon, it's secure."

"Sheldon," said Penny.

They physicist looked up from his clipboard to see Penny and the man standing next to her. This 'Ben' was slightly shorter than Sheldon but stockier and stood very close to Penny.

"This is Ben," Penny continued.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. C," Ben said amiably.

"Dr. Cooper or Sheldon will suffice," Sheldon replied stiffly and returned to his clipboard.

Ben turned to Penny with an inquiring look and she gave him a placating smile.

"I'm Leonard." The smaller man came over to shake hands with Ben. "So you know what we're doing here tonight?"

"That's why I'm here," Ben replied. "When Penny told me that her friends were going to bounce a laser off the moon I had to come." He looked at the laser. "Man, we'd sure like to borrow that sometime."

"Just let me know," said Howard with a slight smirk. "It's not like the university has a sophisticated security system."

"So why are you doing this anyways?" asked Penny.

"In nineteen sixty nine, the astronauts on Apollo 11 positioned reflectors on the surface of the moon, in this instance what we call the Sea of Tranquility," Sheldon said as he walked to the photomultiplier to look over Raj's work.

"We're going to shoot a laser off one of them and let the light bounce back into this photomultiplier," added Leonard.

"Cool," said Penny. "So we get to see a laser show."

"Only as the laser leaves. It won't be strong enough when it comes back to be seen by the naked eye."

"We'll measure the returning photons and see the results on the computer," finished Sheldon. "Raj, glasses."

The astrophysicist handed Penny and Ben shielding glasses before the group sans Howard, who stood by the laser, gathered around the control panel.

"Are we ready?" asked Leonard.


Howard activated the laser and a pulse streaked skyward. He then dashed to the computer.

Two point five seconds later a spike appeared on a flatline.

"Contact!" Leonard said joyfully while Howard and Raj hi-fived each other.

"Way to go, Dr. C," cheered Penny.
"Wait until we tell Alex about this. He'll want you guys on the show," said Ben.

"Anytime you need an engineer give me a shout," said Howard.


Sheldon's gaze went to his clipboard as he walked to the laser and began to write up the results. He'd have to record his findings in his Science Journal and Log.

Reflection off lunar laser ranging retroreflector array was a success.

And Ben was too close to Penny.

XxX

"So was your experiment successful?" asked Amy over Skype.

"Two point five seconds between release and return," said Sheldon matter-of-factly.

Amy cocked her head. "You don't sound as enthusiastic as you did when you mentioned the experiment to me last night." A twitch of a smile flashed her lips. "Were you expecting the moon to blow up?"

"Of course not," frowned Sheldon. "The experiment went off without a hitch. Leonard was excited, Howard was excited, Raj was excited, Penny and her male companion were excited. Why shouldn't I be excited?"

"Penny's male companion?" Amy asked in a serious tone. "Elaborate."

"A colleague from work who apparently likes observing scientific experiments and standing in close proximity to his coworker."

"People huddle together for reasons other than sexual attraction," countered Amy. "For instance, as Penny was the only person familiar to him he could have found comfort in the familiarity. Additionally, they could be reinforcing their social bond so as to alter their paradigm from colleagues to friends."

Sheldon pursed his lips. "But what if their familiarity becomes something more carnal? Mixing work with courtship is a disaster waiting to happen. Just look at Leonard and his trysts with Leslie Winkle and Joyce Kim." He shook his head. "Someone needs to remind Penny that work and play need to be kept separate."

"Sheldon, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"As Penny's friend I'm obligated to look out for her wellbeing."

"Are you sure jealousy isn't a factor?" Amy took in Sheldon's flushing cheeks. "Sheldon--"

"I have to go. My bed time's in twenty minutes and I have yet to shower."

"We should talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about," he hissed before regaining his composure. "Goodnight Amy."

Sheldon closed his laptop and went to the kitchen for a glass of water before retreating to his room. He locked the door and proceeded to his bedside where he took out a Chinese puzzle box from the drawer. After several minute movements it opened and he took out his bottle of pills.
Quickly he popped a pill into his mouth and took a gulp of water.

Leonard and Sheldon were at the mailbox getting their mail when the lobby door opened and Penny entered.

"Hey guys," she said cheerily as she came over wearing her jogging attire.

"Hi," greeted Leonard while Sheldon nodded. "Back from a run?"

"Yeah. Time to shower and then it's off to the Cheesecake Factory. Man I can't wait to quit that place."

The three of them went to the stairs and ascended.

"So," she prompted. "What did ya think of the show?"

"You have to be more specific," replied Sheldon.

"It was fun," said Leonard. Mythbusters had premiered the previous night and the gang sans Penny gathered at 4A to watch the episode. Penny was at a premiere gathering at Alex's place.

"Although the results were obvious even without doing the experiments," sniffed Sheldon.

"So speaks the theoretical physicist," chuckled Penny.

"Well as an experimental physicist I have to say that the show is an excellent tool for relaying scientific principles to the general public," said Leonard.

"A foolish endeavor if there ever was one," chided Sheldon.

"So you think it's a waste of time teaching me stuff?" Penny said with a bit of a frown.

"Leonard said 'general public'. You are a specific individual," Sheldon amended.

"Okay, somewhere in there's a compliment so I'll quit while I'm ahead," said Penny with a crooked smirk.

"So we've established a rapport and can now delve into more delicate matters?"

"Uh, sure," she said. "What's up?"

"As you're aware, Leonard's had several sexual encounters with people from his workplace with less than desirable results."

"Hey!" snapped Leonard. "They weren't all bad."

"An STD test after your Vegas stint and the potential for Federal prison aren't bad?" asked Sheldon with a raised eyebrow.

"Your point, Sheldon?" asked Penny.

"My point is that, while Ben might seem to be a virile candidate for coital activities or eventual pair bonding it might not be a good 'career move'."

Penny came to a halt.
"Nuh uh. We are so not going there again, Sheldon," she growled.

"Uh, I think I left something in the car," murmured Leonard before retreating down the stairs.

"Penny, as your friend it's my duty to give sound advice," Sheldon sniffed. "As this is your first 'gig' I don't want to see it jeopardized."

"You"--she pointed her finger--"can't tell me who I can and can't be friends with." He made to speak but she continued. "I wouldn't put up with this crap if we were dating and I sure as hell am not gonna put up with it now."

She stomped up the stairs and after a moment Sheldon used his long legs to catch up.

"My apologies," he said seriously. "It wasn't my intention to offend."

"So what is your intention?" sighed Penny.

"Your performance last night was exemplary," he said. "You were amusing without being annoying and appeared a capable assistant rather than just 'eye candy' as the urban youth call it."

"Thank you, Sheldon," Penny said. "That means a lot."

"Moreover, you looked happy." Pause. "I don't want anything, or anyone, to jeopardize that. As your friend I owe that to you."

They stopped as they got to their floor.

"Sheldon, everything's okay," said Penny with a smile. She gave him a light pat on the arm. "Thanks for caring but I'm a big girl."

Sheldon nodded and then both Penny and he went to their individual doors and unlocked them before stepping inside.

xTBBTx

"So anyways, that's why it's not gonna work," concluded Penny before taking a sip of her beer.

Ben leaned back on her couch to ponder.

"Well, now I know to take Adam up if he bets tomorrow," he said with a smirk. He tipped his beer bottle towards Penny's door. "Thanks to Sheldon I'll have laundry money for the month."

"That's cool. He's kind of a clean freak so he'd approve of how you're spending it," Penny said.

"Is there anything he isn't super tight about?"

"Not really."

"Part of his charm, huh?" Ben took a swig of beer. "Makes you wonder what he'd be like if he ever let it loo--"

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."
"Door's open, Sheldon."

Sheldon entered and stopped short as he took in Ben and Penny sitting on the couch.

"I hadn't realized you had company," he said.

"It's no biggie," Penny assured him. "So what's up?"

"Pick a card," he said as he held out a fanned deck. "Now don't tell me what it is and then put it back into the deck." Penny gave Ben a glimpse before she obliged.

"Alright." Sheldon shuffled in an awkward fashion several times until he flipped over the top card.

"Is this your card?" he asked.

"Nope," said Penny.

He mulled, his lips moving as Sheldon went over the shuffles. He then made one more shuffle and flipped a card.

"Is this your card?"

"Nope." She took in his look of disappointment. "What's this about?"

"Oh nothing. Just figuring out a trick Howard showed me on Wednesday." Sheldon cocked his head. "Even the Supercomputer at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's stumped."

Ben's jaw dropped. "Isn't that computer used for National Defense?"

"Here's hoping it's better at that than picking out a stupid card," mumbled Sheldon before exiting the apartment.

"He do that often?" Ben asked Penny.

"Yeah, he's in here all the time."

"No I mean hack into government computers."

Penny shrugged. "I don't kno--"

Knock Knock Knock "Penny and Ben."

Ben looked to Penny who held out a finger with a smile.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny and Ben."

She held out a second finger.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny and Ben."

At the third finger she gave out a "Come in, Sheldon."

He opened the door but stood in the doorframe.

"Ben, since your show has access to a myriad of scientific equipment would you happen to have any Uranium-235?" Sheldon asked.
"Definitely not," said Ben.

"Rats. Well, here's hoping I'll have better luck on Craigslist." Sheldon closed the door.

"Um, I don't think that's a good idea," said Ben.

"What?" asked Penny.

"Hacking into a Supercomputer at National Defense and then looking for uranium on the internet."

Penny's face blanched and like a shot she was off the couch and out the door. "Sheldon!"

xTBBTx
"You never told me you could cook," said Penny as she dried a plate.

"You never asked," replied Ben from the couch. "I am a man of many talents. Like for instance I can shop for a vegetarian lasagna at M&M Meat Shop and pass it off as my own."

"I knew it had to be store bought!" Penny laughed. "When you showed me the lasagna I thought 'holy crap, my mother doesn't make it this good!'" 

"You'll note that I never once claimed I made it."

"But you didn't correct me either, smartiboots."

"I've learned to never interrupt a woman when she's praising me," he said with a grin.

Penny's phone rang.

"You, mister, are trouble you know that?" she said before answering the phone. "Hello? ...Wait, Sheldon calm down." She rolled her eyes. "What happened this time? ...Okay just skip the steps and tell me what ya want. ...'Kay. Just a sec." She put the phone on hold. "Sheldon forgot some papers he had on his computer and needs me to send it to him."

"Where is he?"

"On a train to San Francisco to see some guy named Smoot."

"Smoot?"

"Yeah, funny name, huh?" She took off the hold. ..."What? Step four? Honey I haven't left the apartment. ...Hey Leonard." ...She laughed. ..."Yeah, I figured as much." Penny went to the bowl on her shelf for Sheldon's emergency key and then gestured for Ben to follow.

She unlocked the door to 4A and then put a finger to her lips before the pair entered. Ben raised an eyebrow as she sprayed the bottom of her slippers and handed him the antibacterial cleaner.

"Enter your room?" she said into the phone. "You mean I can jump on your bed and put my feet on your pillow? ...Joke Sheldon."

Penny went down the hall and around the corner leaving Ben in the living room. He went to Sheldon's whiteboard and scanned the impressive, albeit completely unintelligible, math formulas.

"Wow," he said with a low whistle. "Guess Dr. C can walk the walk." Upon meeting Sheldon Ben had found the physicist to be arrogant and socially awkward but his friends more than made up for him. Besides, Penny liked him so Sheldon couldn't be that bad.

Ben went to the telescope and looked through it into the sky before scanning the book shelves. Along with the science texts were science fiction and fantasy novels; in particular there were at
least forty Star Trek novels on one shelf.

He went to the couch and sat, waiting for Penny.

"Don't sit there!" came her shout from the hall and Ben got up with a start. "Calm down, Sheldon it's just Ben. ... Hey Leonard, Ben sat in Sheldon's spot. ... Yeah it's probably a strike. Anyhoo it's my bad so wanna put him back on the phone? ...'Sup buttercup? ...Okay." She sat down at Sheldon's computer desk and booted up the computer. "Now where do I put it? ...The part that looks like a ducky's mouth? ...Sure."

Ben paced around the room, stopping by the refrigerator to look over a chart on its door.

"What the hell?" he breathed as he understood its content. "Sheldon must have a ruler and how the hell does he know its consistency?*

"'Kay, let me know when you get it," said Penny. "Sure, sure, bye." She spun the chair to face Ben. "Gotta love the guy."

He turned to her with an amazed expression. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked as he pointed to the chart with his thumb.

"Kinda brings a whole new level to saying Dr. C's anal, huh?" she chuckled.

"There's anal and then there's whacked."

"He's not that bad," Penny said defensively. "I mean would it be better if he didn't measure his poop? Sure. But, hey, he doesn't cook meth like my brother so who cares?"

"Penny, there's a lot of room between meth cooker and poop counter," chuckled Ben. "I'd love to see where you put me on that scale."

"Well, you do pop a lot of Tic-Tacs," she winked as her phone rang. "Hello? ...Okay good. ...Nice try, Sheldon. ...'Kay, have a good trip. ... Yes he sprayed his shoes. ...Goodbye, Sheldon." She hung up and swung her chair around to the laptop. "I swear that...guy...."

Ben came over and looked over Penny's shoulder at a picture of Penny and Sheldon standing in front of a Roman temple by a pool. Both were smiling and had their arms around each other.

Then the screensaver changed and there was a picture of Swamp-Thing.

Without a word Penny closed the laptop.

"I take it I've just met 'Complicated'?" Ben said gently.

"Yeah," Penny whispered.

"How long did you guys go out?"

"We didn't," said Penny. "I mean it was one date."

"Didn't go so well, huh?" asked Ben.

Penny swiveled her chair to face her friend.

"It went too well," she sighed.

Ben smiled grimly. "Couldn't have been that good if you're friends now. Unless you're saying it
was good for you but not for him." Silence. "Unrequited love sucks."

"He said he loved me."

"Really?"

"He was completely out of it but he did say it." Penny leaned back in the chair and sighed.

"So let me get this straight: Dr. C loves you and you obviously like him. So what's the problem?"

As one they both said, "It's complicated."

"Okay, I'll quit being Dr. Phil," Ben chuckled.

"Don't worry about it." Penny put her hands to her face and made a frustrated noise before looking at Ben with a sad smile. "I still can't shake him."

"Do you see things changing with him?"

"Probably not."

"Probably doesn't mean no," said Ben. "Does probably come from reality or wishful thinking?"

"I don't know." Penny shook her head. "I thought I was cool with us being friends but now I don't know. Once I break up with a serious boyfriend I never look back so this thing with Sheldon is hard." She sighed as she indicated the computer with her head. "Especially when it's obvious he thinks about us, too." Pause. "I just don't know what to do."

"It sounds like you have two options: fight for what you want or let him go." Ben caught her eyes with his own. "Life's ticking by and it's stupid to be spending it miserable."

Penny gave him a smile and got up from her chair.

"Peach schnapps sound good?" she asked.

xTBBTx

"Thank you for inviting me over for dinner," said Sheldon as he finished off his blueberry cheesecake. "I haven't had spaghetti with Mama Italia Marinara Sauce and cut up hot dogs since Mother was here."

"You're welcome, sweetie," said Penny. "I was in the store and spotted it and thought what the heck?"

In actuality Penny had called his mother for the name of the sauce. All she remembered was Sheldon calling it an 'Eye-talian treat'.

"Do you need help with the dishes or will you wait until they pile up before doing them?" he asked.

Penny wrinkled her nose as she smirked. "Cuteness will only get ya so far, y'know."

"I didn't think I was being trite."

"I meant you're adorable."

"Ah." He dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "As I've never judged myself at an aesthetic level apart
"from my genital region I'll have to take your word for it."

"A man who loves his penis. Who woulda thought?" Penny chuckled.

"There's a lot to consider such as length, girth, functionality," he said evenly.

"Well if you ever need a second opinion, you know who you can call," she said with a wink.

"An andrologist?"

Penny shook her head with a smile on her lips. "Sheldon, Sheldon, Sheldon. What am I gonna do with you?"

"Nothing illegal I hope."

"Depends on what you consider...illegal."

He raised an eyebrow. "Any act that contravenes the criminal or civil codes of law."

"That leaves a lot to play with."

"Yes, well, there are also personal considerations to take into account. For instance, while it's legal to snort cinnamon I haven't felt the inclination to do so," Sheldon amended.

"There's other things, y'know. Like maybe hang out a little more?" Penny bit her lower lip. *Come on Sheldon, work with me!*

"I'm working on a dark matter project I had neglected," Sheldon said. "Besides, your time is spent filming your program or working at the Cheesecake Factory."

"Yeah, but it's important we don't lose touch," Penny pressed. "I mean two people who care about each other should spend time together." She tried to catch his eyes. "You know, so they can care even more."

A twitch took his mouth.

"It's a matter of practicality not feeling," he said slowly.

Penny sat back in her chair with a frown on her face.

"So you're saying your schedule's more important than I am?" she asked crisply. Sheldon pursed his lips even as he glanced out the window. "You're making comments about Ben like you did with Justin and I'm not supposed to think that you don't care?" She leaned forward. "I saw your screensaver. I saw *us*. And it's stupid that you won't--"

"I have to go," Sheldon said as he quickly stood.

"Sheldon--"

He darted to the door as she rose to follow.

"What the hell do you want from me?!" Penny shouted.

The physicist stopped at the door, his hand frozen on the knob. There was a pause before he turned to Penny.

"Perhaps the better question is what do you want from me?"
Her shoulders sagged and to Sheldon she looked tired.

"I can't keep it clinical like you, Sheldon."

"So you don't want to be my friend?" he quietly asked.

"I shit or get off the pot, y'know?"

"I do now," he said and after a moment more he turned and exited the apartment.

Penny waited a moment before flopping down on her couch.

"Well that was a fucking disaster," she sighed. "Doesn't he see he's being an idiot?" Here a flash of guilt twinged her stomach. *He did have a nervous breakdown, Pen.* Still he had to know how important this was. She clapped a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. She wasn't crazy. Sheldon did like her and whether he knew it or not he was pulling the same shit that he did with Justin. What did the physicist expect, Penny to be single forev--

Her eyes opened as she heard a slip of paper under the door. She got up and retrieved it:

*Notice of Termination of Friendship Agreement.*

We, the undersigned, have elected to terminate the above contract effective immediately in accordance with the terms and provisions of the contract as outlined in section 20.

This absolves both parties from the responsibilities and rights associated with friendship and furthermore reinstates the former designation of 'neighbors' with the expectation that all further interaction will be of an impersonal nature.*

At the bottom was Sheldon's signature and the date.

"This isn't what I meant, Sheldon," Penny said before stopping short. What the hell do I mean? She told him that she didn't want to be just friends and he told her no. It was up to her to deal with it and now Sheldon took that away from her. All her talk about shitting or off the pot sounded so tough but at this moment as she stared at the termination notice Penny was heartbroken.

Although he didn't answer she sensed that he was in the hall.

As her last act as a friend she wouldn't keep him waiting.

Penny took up a pen and signed her name before sliding the paper under the door.

A moment and then it disappeared before the sound of a door closing echoed across the hall.

xTBBTx

Leonard woke up to the smell of toast in his room. He squinted at the clock before reaching for his glasses. It was four thirty in the morning.

"Huh," he said as he got out of bed. It had been a week since he'd seen Sheldon. After getting the scoop from Penny Leonard tried to make himself available but he hadn't been able to lure Sheldon out of his bedroom to talk to him. The best Leonard could do was make a dinner plate and leave it in the refrigerator. By morning he'd find it washed and in the drain tray--the lone evidence of Sheldon's existence in the apartment.

Leonard quietly opened his door and crept down the hall to the kitchen where Sheldon was busily
assembling a sandwich.

"Hey buddy," Leonard said gently.

Sheldon froze, a deer in the headlights.

"I talked to Penny and she told me what was going on," Leonard continued.

Sheldon hastily slapped the rest of his sandwich together and grabbed the bottled water off the counter.

"Sometimes life's rough but you can't give up on it." The lanky physicist darted by Leonard, who followed to the now closed bedroom door. "Sheldon, you have to come out sometime!"

The lock clicked.

Leonard sighed before he went to use the washroom.

Maybe he'd have better luck tomorrow.

xTBBTx

"So apparently we're going to a marina next week to set fire to a boat," said Penny as she sat down on her couch with a vodka and cranberry juice mix.

"Maybe set fire," replied Ben. "The guys at MIT seem confident that they can do it but I dunno if mirrors can do it all by themselves."

"So what does Adam say?"

"He's optimistic but Jamie has his doubts."

Penny took a sip of her drink. "So do mirrors help heat up the sunbeam or are they just reflecting the sun?"

"No idea," said Ben. "Maybe we can ask Dr. C about the logistics. It'll help me know if I should bet or not."

"Sheldon and I aren't talking," Penny said slowly.

Ben raised an eyebrow. "A fight?"

"We got off the pot," she said matter-of-factly and took a big gulp.

"Ah. Sorry to hear that."

"Yeah." She slumped against the couch.

"Still, at least you know where you stand," Ben said gently.

"I guess. Still sucks." She took another sip. "You know I haven't been drunk since Halloween night?" She ran her finger around the rim of her glass. "I blacked out and Dr. C said I fondled him."

"Talk about trick or treat." They both chuckled.

"Big Ol' Five. That's me." She raised her glass into the air. "Lock and load, boys, Penny's back on
"I've got an idea," said Ben as he took her glass. "Instead of getting shitfaced let's go for dinner."

"Dr. C said not to date anyone from work."

"It's not a date," Ben said firmly. "Look Pen, I'd be lying to you if I said I wasn't interested. But I'm not a jerk." He gave a slight smile. "Come on, let's get some pasta into us."

"Thanks Ben," Penny said earnestly.

He winked and they both smiled.

xTBBTx

"Well as a bright side we can play what we want," said Howard as Leonard, Raj and he ascended the stairs. "I mean as fun as Zork is I could really use a round of Golden Axe."

"I'm not knocking anything at this point," replied Leonard. "Sheldon texted me that he'd be joining us tonight. Hopefully that means he'll be back at work next week."

"That'd be nice," said Raj. "I think they took more raisins out of the rice pudding since he left."

"Oi vey," mumbled Howard as they got to the fourth floor.

Just then Penny's door opened and she stepped out.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," Leonard replied.

She indicated the bag he was carrying. "Chinese night."

"Yeah. You can have some if you want," offered Leonard.

"That's okay. Gwen and I are going for dinner."

"Okay, well have a good night."

All four smiled awkwardly and Penny went down the stairs.

"Well that was uncomfortable," said Howard.

Leonard nodded and opened the door. "I'll have a talk with Sheldon later since he's out and--"

All three stopped dead in the doorway and took in the sight of a computer monitor mounted on a pole that was attached to a motorized track standing in front of Sheldon's whiteboard. The contraption moved in place to reveal one of Sheldon's Flash t-shirts hanging from a hanger underneath the monitor and the physicist's face on the screen.

"Greetings friends," Sheldon said amiably.

"You've got to be kidding me," Leonard said exasperatedly.

"I hope you remembered to make sure my chicken is diced not shredded," Sheldon continued.

"You've got his mom on speed dial, right?" Howard murmured to Leonard.
"Isn't that tread from M.O.N.T.E?" asked Raj as he sat down on the couch.

"You're observant," said Sheldon. "While I didn't want to cannibalize him there was some merit to the idea of 'passing on' what was salvageable to the next generation as it were." The robot moved forward and stopped. "Raj, you're in my spot."

"But you can't sit," the astrophysicist countered as he moved over a cushion.

For its part the robot moved itself to the couch and positioned itself in front of Sheldon's spot.

"Leonard, be a lamb and get the hot mustard and low sodium soy sauce from the refrigerator," said Sheldon.

Leonard rolled his eyes as Howard chuckled while opening his food packet.

"This is insane," the short physicist said and marched down the hall to Sheldon's door. He knocked twice and tried the handle but it was locked. "Sheldon, open the door."

"Leonard, I'm in the living room if you want to speak to me," said Sheldon's voice from behind the door.

"No you're not. I can hear you talking in your bedroom."

Down the hall came the motorized sounds of movement until the Sheldon-run robot came to Leonard.

"You wished to speak with me?" the robot-Sheldon asked.

"What the hell's going on, Sheldon?"

"Well, we're having Chinese food followed by Vintage Ga-"

"I mean with this Shelbot crap!"

"You mean my mobile virtual presence device." Sheldon cleared his throat. "Recent events have demonstrated to me that I'm too vulnerable against the vicissitudes of the world. Hence, I shall remain in a secure location and interact with the world in this manner."

"How is interacting with people through a virtual machine going to protect you from being hurt?" snapped Leonard. "You're still talking."

"Not necessarily," countered Sheldon and at once the screen went black. In white letters the message, 'I could write' appeared.

"This is stupid. Sheldon, come out of your room or I'm calling your mother."

The screen flicked back to Sheldon's scowling face.

"You'll do no such thing," he said coldly. "I'm fine."

Leonard sighed. "Sheldon, this is so not fine."

"Why? This solution addresses my need to be alone while at the same time participating in the world."

Leonard folded his arms across his chest.
"Fine, then figure out how to participate in eating dinner since your machine doesn't have arms," he said crisply before side stepping the machine.

"But you have to help, it's in the Roommate Agreement!" Sheldon said. Leonard turned to the robot. "Section seventy four 'C'. The various obligations and duties of the parties in the event one of them becomes a robot."

Leonard looked at the ceiling and sighed before trudging back to the living room followed by a smiling Shelbot.

xTBBTx

"The Roommate Agreement might say I have to help you but that doesn't mean I have to do it competently," grumbled Leonard as he disassembled the Shelbot in the lobby. "I kept you in mind when I designed my creation," tutted Sheldon. "Given your limited upper body strength I made sure I came apart into four pieces."

"Even more if I drop you going up the stairs."

Sheldon shook his head. "Threats of violence. Really Leonard I--"

"Hey Leonard."

The short physicist looked up. "Hey Penny."

"Whatcha got there?" she asked as she came over to the machine. It had a darkened monitor on a pole that was stuck into a mini tank. "This M.O.N.T.E part two?"

"Welcome to Shelbot," sighed Leonard as he stood and lifted the monitor off the top. "Give me a hand?"

"Sure." She took the monitor. "Shelbot?"

"Yeah, Sheldon decided that he no longer wants to"--he pulled out the pole and handed it to her--"deal with the outside world so he built himself a robot."

"Oh balls," sighed Penny. "You call his mom?"

"He doesn't want me to." Leonard shrugged. "I just want to see how this plays out before I scare her."

"You're carrying a robot up the stairs, Leonard. I think that's whacked enough."

"Even for Sheldon? I mean aside from this he seems happy enough. We played computer games and had dinners and"--he blanched. "Uh, I should warn you that tomorrow's the Cheesecake Factory and he might want to go."

"Well this'll make for an interesting shift," sighed Penny. She saw Leonard struggling with the base and handed him the monitor and pole. "Let me." She picked up the base and the pair made their way up the stairs.

"You should talk to him," Leonard said after a moment.

"I can't. Things are complicated."

"Then uncomplicate them."

"Fine, then figure out how to participate in eating dinner since your machine doesn't have arms," he said crisply before side stepping the machine.

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"I can't. Things are complicated."

"Then uncomplicate them."
Penny shook her head. "Leonard, he's not interested in being anything other than friends and at the same time he doesn't know boundaries 'cause he's always asking about my male friends. I need to give myself a chance."

"I guess," said Leonard. "I suppose as a bright side I'm developing upper body strength carrying Shelbot up the steps."

"Is that what he calls it?" chuckled Penny.

"No, my term. The monitor turns on and you can see his face."

"Sounds creepy."

"Yeah, I almost crashed my car the first time I went driving with it," scowled Leonard.

They arrived at their floor and Penny set down the base by Leonard's door.

"Here ya go," she said.

"Thanks."

"I miss you guys." She gave Leonard a sad smile.

"We miss you, too," he replied.

XxX

Inside his bedroom Sheldon watched Penny on the webcam mounted on his monitor as she walked to her apartment door until the angle changed and Leonard's crotch filled the screen.

xTBBTx

Amy came up the stairs, preparing herself for anything. Leonard had called and said that Sheldon had built himself a robot. As a neurobiologist the idea that Sheldon had, again, lost his mind made her worry if there was perhaps a tumor that was missed in the MRI. Only a full dissection would determine otherwise. Amy would have to be patient.

She knocked at the door and then Leonard answered.

"Great. You're here," he said and grabbed the keys from the bowl. "Good luck." He darted by her and practically ran down the stairs.

Amy entered the room, her eyes widening at the sight of the Shelbot sitting in front of his spot on the couch, but otherwise her demeanor remained calm.

"Good evening Sheldon," she said as she sprayed her shoes.

The robot turned to reveal a smiling Sheldon on the screen.

"Hello Amy," he said. "I hope traffic wasn't too bad."

"Fortunately it's a week night." She went to the couch and sat. "It's obvious the last time we Skyped that you forgot to update me on this robotic transformation. Discuss."

"It's merely a physical manifestation of my decision to distance myself from the world," he explained calmly. "As things stand I've had a talk with Gablehauser about working from home"
and he said it was possible on a part-time basis."

"I see. And what brought you to this epiphany?"

"Nothing per se." A tic closed his right eye for a moment as his lips pursed. "It just occurred to me that I was spending too much time socializing when I could be working."

"But we're socializing now," Amy countered.

"True. But earlier when Leonard was talking I managed to work on spin gravity calculations." Here Sheldon flashed a smile. "I should have done this years ago."

Amy pursed her lips. "I doubt you would have had reason to do this. After all, Penny had only recently moved into the building."

"You've been talking to Leonard," snapped Sheldon.

"He did call me, yes."

"Let me guess, he's saying that the dissolution of Penny's and my friendship is the catalyst for my current incarnation?"

Amy cocked her head. "Isn't it obvious?"

"I've moved past Penny. After all, I've got other friends," he sniffed. "Friends who are scientists and or science fiction aficionados."

"True, but then again you don't have the notion to pair-bond with any of us either," Amy pointed out. Sheldon gazed downward. "Sheldon, talk to Penny."

"We're no longer friends," he said firmly.

"That's a mistake."

He shook his head. "It's what she wanted. I apparently 'don't know boundaries'," he said snarkily.

"Perhaps this wavering indicates your desire to pair-bond is still strong. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is to never talk about this subject again," scowled Sheldon. "Besides, I have other news. My colleague, Dr. Elizabeth Plimpton, is coming to Pasadena for an interview. I've invited her to stay over."

"Good for you," nodded Amy.

"She's already aware of my stringent rules regarding cleanliness." He raised an eyebrow. "The only thing is that I'm unsure of what to supply a female guest. So far as I know tampons, Midol and yogurt promoting regularity are staples."

"I concur. Although she might prefer feminine napkins." Amy patted her purse. "Fortunately I keep a couple of spares at all times. I also wear one daily in order to avoid surprises."

"Prudent," nodded Sheldon.

"Naturally," she replied.

xTBBTx
After a long, hot shower Penny got into her pajamas and housecoat and made her way to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. Tomorrow they were off to the marina to set fire to a boat with a mirror. Adam and Jamie were looking forward to it and she did her best to seem upbeat.

Even though she didn't know what was going on.

With a sigh she sat down on the couch and clicked on her computer. She'd run through the episode outline and then Google things she didn't understand.

She was surprised as her script popped up that it had a series of side notes and web links attached to it. Her eyes went to the first note and she read:

Your experiment seeks to replicate the Archimedes Heat Ray. The second century AD author Lucian wrote that during the Siege of Syracuse (c 214-212 BC), Archimedes destroyed enemy ships with fire. The 'burning-glasses' device was used to focus sunlight onto approaching ships, causing them to catch fire.

She clicked on a link and it took her to a webpage where there was a diagram of a mirror and light rays.

Electromagnetic waves of light carry with them heat energy. This energy is reflected by shiny surfaces such as smooth, polished metal or glass. The smoother and flatter a mirrored surface, the less the light wave is dispersed and the truer the reflected beam is to the original.

"Sheldon," she whispered.

XxX

Sheldon was working away at the whiteboard he'd set up in his room when his phone chimed. He picked it up and read the message:

Penny: Thanx

He saved the message and resumed his work.

xTBBTx

At the knock at the door Penny set down her mug of tea and went to answer.

"Hey Amy," she said a little surprised. She hadn't seen the neurobiologist since she and Sheldon stopped being friends although the two women did continue to be Facebook friends. "What's up?"

"Sheldon's having a lady-friend stay with him. In other news I'm thinking of starting a herb garden," Amy said evenly. "Well, mum's the word. Gotta go." She turned away.

"Wait!"

Amy smiled before turning to Penny straight faced.

"Yes?" she said innocently.

"Uh, we haven't talked in a while," said Penny. "Wanna come in?"

"Sure."

The neurobiologist stepped inside and settled herself on the couch while Penny closed the door.
"Want something to drink?" asked Penny.

"No thank you."

Penny took in Amy's rigid form before sitting beside her.

"So, um, what were you talking about?" Penny inquired.

"I was at the market the other day and was dissatisfied with the freshness of the dill. It occurred to me that I could grow--"

"No, I mean about Sheldon."

"Ah, you mean his lady-friend?"

"I never knew he had more friends." Penny put on a casual smile. "Good for him."

"Yes. He's conversed with Dr. Elizabeth Plimpton for a while now on a mutual subject of interest. She'll be staying with him for a few days while she is interviewed," said Amy.

"Another doctor?"

"An astrophysicist."

"Ah." Penny's face stiffened. "A physicist." She gave a slight shrug. "Well at least they'll have a lot to talk about." A thought came to her. "Is Sheldon still using that robot?"

"Unfortunately," said Amy.

"Maybe his lady-friend will get him out of his shell."

"He already has a friend who does that, and quite successfully I may add," Amy said seriously.

"That ship has sailed, Ames." Penny replied.  

"So what are you going to do with Sheldon?"

"What's there to do? We're no longer friends." Penny got up and began to pace. "We go on with life, y'know?"

Amy pursed her lips. "Penny, he misses you and as we both know he doesn't attach himself to too many people."

"He's not my responsibility," Penny snapped. "He's a grown man even if he has a stupid robot."

"So you're content having him out of your life?" asked Amy.

Penny stopped pacing. "No," she sighed.

Amy straightened her skirt. "Penny, granted I haven't had any friends prior to knowing Sheldon and you but that doesn't mean I'm ignorant of the paradigm. Relationships promote growth. The Sheldon I know wouldn't have been possible without you."

"You mean a robot?" snorted Penny.

"That's just his simplistic way of dealing with an emotional loss," explained Amy. "I mean that he would never have been in a place to have friends and communal activities without you."
"Well, here's another lesson about friends. They drift apart," Penny said seriously. "I mean Lisa Peterson hasn't talked to me since the eleventh grade and we were practically sisters."

"What happened?"

"We had a fight," Penny said with a bit of a blush. "Because no matter how much you apologize, you can't go back and un-dry-hump someone's boyfriend."

"Noted," nodded Amy. "But dry-humping aside we still have to address Sheldon." Amy gave a slight smile. "You're good for him."

"He doesn't think so."

Amy was surprised. "So he no longer wanted to be friends with you? Did he give an explanation?"

Penny flumped on the couch. "I told him I didn't want to be just friends and so he ended things."

"And you're satisfied with the outcome?"

"Yes." Penny closed her eyes, leaned against the back of the couch. "I dunno. I mean I know where I stand with him and I can get on with my life." She opened her eyes. "There's this guy I know."


"He's awesome. We get along and he's totally cool with taking things slow."

Amy's back straightened. "So you've progressed to another relationship?"

"Not yet," said Penny. "I mean it's kinda at the pre-start but when I'm ready I'd like to give it a try."

"I see." Amy got up and straightened her skirt. "Well, I should be going."

"Nice seeing you again," said Penny.

Amy opened the door but stopped in the doorframe before turning around.

"Leonard said that when Sheldon saw what you gave him for Christmas he cried," she said evenly. "I bet a lot of people won't see much of a difference between Sheldon and his new robot persona, even Sheldon himself, because they never gave him a chance. That's your true gift, Penny. You showed him he was worth it."

The neurobiologist closed the door and walked down the stairs.

xTBBTx

Both Leonard and Sheldon jumped as they encountered each other exiting their perspective bedrooms. Sheldon scurried back into his room and closed the door before Leonard nervously hurried down the hall and into the kitchen to put on the coffee.

As he worked, Leonard did his best to calm himself. After all, he was single. It wasn't like he was cheating.

The motorized sound came closer and Leonard took a breath.
"What were you doing in your bedroom?" Shelbot said in an accusing voice. "You know Elizabeth got in late last night."

"I, uh, was waking her up," stammered Leonard before focusing an inordinate amount of energy on leveling scoops of coffee and pouring them in the filter.

"She has a clock."

"Yes, well, I just didn't want her to be late."

"Oh," Sheldon replied. "Well, that was thoughtful. By the way, I call shotgun."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to have Elizabeth sit up front since she's actually going to be there?" Leonard pointed out.

Sheldon frowned. "But I'll get carsick."

"You're not in the car!"

"Who's not in the car?" asked Elizabeth sweetly as she came out in her short bathrobe.

"Elizabeth, are you prone to carsickness?" asked Sheldon.

"Not really."

"Excellent," he smirked. "Then you can sit behind Leonard."

"We never tried it from behind," she said coyly. "Sounds like fun."

Sheldon stared at his roommate. "Leonard, is there something wrong? You're positively crimson."

"I, uh, need my inhaler," gasped Leonard who darted from the room.

Sheldon turned to Elizabeth, who smiled innocently before taking up the coffee pot to fill it with water.

XxX

Sheldon stared thoughtfully at the whiteboard in his room. There was a missing quark and he wasn't sure where to find it.

"Perhaps if I--"

A knock at his door.

"Sheldon?" said Elizabeth. "I'm sorry to interrupt but Leonard said you had spare keys to the apartment that I could borrow. The emergency keys are at Penny's and she's out."

The lanky physicist set down his marker and went to his drawer for his keys before opening the door.

Elizabeth took the keys from his outstretched hand.

"You're much taller than I thought," she said pleasantly.

"Six foot two," he replied.
"Leading man material."

"Leading to where?"

"Or not," Elizabeth chuckled. "If you don't mind me asking, why do you have the robot?"

"I don't wish to personally connect with anyone," Sheldon said. "It's unsanitary. And it hurts."

"But connecting with people is all a part of being human. Besides, it's fun when it gets creative."

"I consider myself homo novus. I'm beyond that."

"Lots of people excuse themselves from companionship. Monks for instance." Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Are you perhaps having an existential crisis?"

"I know my purpose in life: to expand humanity's knowledge of the beginnings of the universe," Sheldon sniffed.

"Which one?"

"This universe, of course."

"No, I mean which beginning?"

Sheldon cocked his head. "Explain."

"Well, there's the Big Bang, Planck epoch, Grand Unification epoch, Electroweak epoch, Quark epoch, Hadron epoch, Photon---"

"All are within the spectrum of the initial creation," Sheldon interjected.

"Agreed. They're all a part of the first beginning."

Sheldon gave a haughty shake of the head. "Dr. Plimpton, you can't be suggesting a Biblical Genesis."

"Of course not," she replied. "But there is a second beginning that takes place wherever there's sentient life. Consciousness. Our own life. The way in which the universe explores itself. You're doing the universe a disservice by hiding away."

"I'm a theoretical physicist," Sheldon countered. "I don't need to explore, I just require data."

"If we don't explore we don't gather data, we borrow it from someone else's hearsay and that undermines the entire purpose of living," Elizabeth smiled. "Each of us are our own universe, Sheldon. Without interacting with other people you'll never truly know yourself. And personally speaking, I'm much too curious to leave a universe unexplored." She jangled the keys. "Thanks for these."

"I'll see you later," replied Sheldon.

"Actually, I think I'll be spending the night at Raj's," Elizabeth said lightly. "I've got a craving for mocha cream and I'm willing to bet he brews a great cup."

Sheldon checked his watch. "Isn't it late for a caffeinated beverage?"

"It's never too late when it comes to connecting, Dr. Cooper," Elizabeth said sweetly.
Sheldon paused and then closed his door. He returned to his whiteboard and picked up his marker only to stop and stare at his door. With a shake of the head he tried to focus on the quark hunt but after five minutes of looking he gave up. His mind kept transforming the quarks into particles from the Big Bang, a starlit night, a golf ball rolling into a cup.

Again he stared at his bedroom door, this time with a frown.

He set down his marker and went to his nightstand for his phone. He cleared his throat as he dialed and waited.

"Hello Amy," he said. "I want a hot beverage. Perhaps we could go to a cafe and talk? ... No, no robot. ... I'll be waiting at the front of the building."

Sheldon grabbed his wallet and jacket and went to the living room. As he was putting on his shoes he suddenly remembered that he gave Elizabeth his keys. Automatically he looked into the key bowl and to his surprise saw the spare keys.

He picked them up and, after a deep breath, stepped outside.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Grand Unification Epoch

historyhowstuffworkarchimedesdeath: Archimedes Death Ray
So, next Friday, Star Trek? asked Ben hopefully.

"Seriously?" Penny leaned back against his black leather sofa and smirked. "What is it with guys and Star Trek?"

"What's not to like? We've got star ships and phasers and hot alien chicks."

"What about Spock?" she asked.

"Spock's okay but I've always seen myself as Scotty," Ben said before taking a slug of beer from the bottle. "But Captain, the ship canna take anymore!" They both chuckled.

"So who would I be?"

"Tasha Yar," Ben said without skipping a beat. "She's the chief security officer on Next Generation. Good looking, capable and deadly."

"Sounds like a real party gal," snorted Penny.

"Hey, she got it on," said Ben. "In fact she managed to seduce an android so that's nothing to sneeze at."

"That's pretty hard to do," Penny agreed after a pause.

"Well, it helps that he's 'fully functional'," said Ben with a crooked smile as he picked up the remote. "So, shall we start or do--"

Penny's phone rang.

She automatically picked it up and her eyes widened at the name of the caller.

"Just a sec," she said to Ben before answering. "Hello?" Her stomach tightened. "What's up, Leonard? ...Oh man. ...Yeah, not a good idea. So how come you're out there?" She rolled her eyes. "No, no, that makes plenty of sense," Penny said tongue-in-cheek. "Sure. I'll be there soon. ...Okay, bye."

She hung up and turned to Ben. "I've gotta go. Leonard's car broke down and they're stranded on the highway."

"Couldn't Howard or the astrophysicist pick them up?" asked Ben seriously.

"They're with them."

"So where are they?"

"Interstate Five South. They're on their way to pick up some of Sheldon's stuff that was stolen." Penny got off the couch and picked up her purse.
Ben frowned. "So why didn't he call the police?"

"It's World of Warcraft stuff," Penny explained as she went to the door for her shoes.

"So let me get this straight," Ben said incredulously. "A bunch of scientists hopped in a car to go to..."

"Carlsbad."

"Carlsbad to tell some guy to give Sheldon his imaginary stuff back?"

"Pretty much," said Penny.

Ben went to the door. "And you're going?"

"Ben, they're on the highway."

"Not the way I expected to spend the night," Ben snorted as he reached for his jacket.

"There isn't enough room for you in the car," replied Penny. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Penny exited the apartment and Ben stood in thought at the door before returning to the couch.

The girl he liked was off to rescue her sorta ex-boyfriend.

"Just like Tasha," he chuckled and then it hit him. Tasha and Data.

He picked up his beer and took a swig before turning on the television.

"This isn't gonna end well for you, Ben, ol' buddy," he mumbled to himself.

XxX

As she drove Penny realized it had been weeks since she'd seen the guys aside from bumping into them in the hall. Mythbusters was a hit and Discovery had ordered more episodes. To generate even more buzz Adam, Jamie and Penny were whisked off to a couple of sci-fi and tech conventions. Granted it wasn't the fan base she'd imagined when she dreamed of signing autographs and posing for pictures but she couldn't deny the fun in being so enthusiastically recognized. If things kept going at this rate she'd be in a position to quit the Cheesecake Factory, which wouldn't be a loss since the guys no longer went there.

Ahead of her to the right was a tow truck and a car with its hazards flashing and she signaled before turning off the highway. Four people came towards her and Penny was a mix of anticipation and anxiety as the doors of her car opened and the guys--her boys--got in.

"Thanks Penny," said Leonard sheepishly as he sat in the passenger seat.

"No problem," she smiled back before looking in the rear view mirror. "Hey guys." Her eyes lingered on Sheldon before she realized what she was doing and returned her gaze to Leonard. "So what happened?"

"Dunno. We were driving and then the car started slowing so I pulled off and it died," said Leonard.

"That doesn't mean much," chuckled Penny as she signaled and got back on the highway. "I mean you guys build robots so what's a little engine trouble?"
"While we're all familiar with the history and theoretical workings of the combustible engine none of us have any practical knowledge."

"Ah." Silence. "So what did that guy steal anyways?"


"Glenn?" asked Penny.

"My battle ostrich."

"Looks like Zarnecki wins," said Leonard.

Penny raised an eyebrow. "Zarnecki?"

"Todd Zarnecki," said Howard. "He's the guy who hacked Sheldon's account. I managed to find out where he lives and we were going to ride in there like vengeance unbound."

"But instead it's another pantsing," said Sheldon. "Another bully added to the list of lunch money stealers, kite snatchers--"

Penny signaled and took an exit ramp.

"Where are we going?" asked Leonard.

"To finish this quest Nebraska style," she said firmly.

XxX

"I don't know if this is a good idea," stammered Leonard as the four scientists plus Penny stood at the Zarnecki front door. "Todd's a pretty big guy."

"And he has my bet'leth," Sheldon warned.

"What's that?" asked Penny.

"A Klingon battle blade."

"Why am I surprised?" she chuckled as she rang the doorbell.

A moment and then the door opened to reveal a large man with curly brown hair and glasses.

"You again?" he sneered as he took in the guys.

"Hey," said Penny. "You took my friend's stuff. Give it back or I'll-"

"Penny?" Todd gasped.

She glanced at Sheldon questioningly before returning her gaze to Todd.

"Yes?" she said.

Todd was delighted. "Oh my God you're Penny from Mythbusters!"

Penny flashed a smile. "Ya got me."
"Oh wow, oh wow. I watch your show all the time and I saw you three weeks ago in Oakland!"

Penny made to speak. "I've got all the episodes and interviews. I even have that Ape movie you di-"

"I think we're losing focus," Penny said quickly. "You took Sheldon's stuff."

"Sheldor's your friend?" Todd asked incredulously.

Penny and Sheldon glanced awkwardly at each other.

"She's our neighbor," Leonard interjected.

"Okay, whatever." Todd smiled hopefully. "So can I have an autographed picture?"

"I don't have any pictures," Penny replied.

"That's okay. I've got some I can print up," he continued enthusiastically.

"Sheldon gets his stuff back first," she said flatly. "Including his Klingon thingie."

"Sure. Come on in."

Penny turned to Sheldon and shrugged before everyone went inside.

XxX

"Thanks again for coming," said Leonard as Penny, Sheldon and he ascended the stairs at Los Robles.

"My pleasure, sweetie," she said with a smile. "It was fun hanging out with you guys."

They got to their floor and Sheldon slipped by them to unlock his door.

"Nice to see you again, Sheldon," Penny said warmly before she went to her door.

Sheldon gave a brisk nod without turning around as he stepped inside his apartment and excitedly sprayed his shoe bottoms before darting to his computer.

"'Night Penny," said Leonard before closing the door and stepping out of his shoes.

"It's all here!" Sheldon said happily. "Hello Glenn," he cooed.

"It was nice of Penny to do this," said Leonard. "She didn't have to, you know."

Silence.

"At least thank her," Leonard pressed before crossing through the living room and down the hall.

Sheldon continued to click away at his computer.

xTBBTx

Penny came out of the bedroom wearing a smile that hadn't faded since last night. She felt pumped at seeing the guys--his blue eyes staring at her--and getting the Warcraft stuff back. It also made her giggle that Zarnecki completely fangirled over her, although she had a bad feeling that Howard was going to Google her name and 'ape' when he got home.
"Crap!" Penny hissed when she saw the time on the microwave. She'd been free floating so much she'd lost track and today she'd be traveling during rush hour. Quickly she snagged her purse from the counter and dashed to the door for her flip-flops. She opened the door and a white bag that hung on the handle flopped against her. With a roll of the eye she plucked it off as she closed the door. *Looks like someone let in a solicitor again.* Penny locked the door and made for the stairs as she looked in the bag--and stopped dead.

She reached in and pulled out a neatly folded Green Lantern t-shirt.

After a moment she put it back in the bag and hurried down the steps.

XxX

"That was so awesome," Raj grinned as he leaned against Sheldon's office desk.

"When isn't physics awesome?" murmured Sheldon as he stared at the dark matter equations on the whiteboard.

"I mean last night." Raj shook a fist in the air. "Vengeance was ours!"

"It was hardly vengeance," sniffed Sheldon as he changed a number. "By the end of the night Zarnecki had joined our Warcraft party." He shook his head. "A complete hippy love-in."

"Course it helped that he was a fan of Penny's show."

Sheldon snorted. "You mean a fan of Penny."

"Howard emailed me a link to her movie, Serial Apeist," Raj said slowly. "I can see why she never mentioned it before."

"The special effects were abysmal, the plot, juvenile," agreed Sheldon.

Raj was surprised. "You mean you saw it?"

"A while ago." Sheldon pursed his lips and then began writing a new equation.

"Even the, uh, shower scene?"

"It was in the movie."

"You're a real gentleman for not bringing it up," smiled Raj.

"Penny said that she hadn't acted in anything prior to the Rent showcase so when I inadvertently found the Serial Apeist reference I assumed she wished to keep that a secret," said Sheldon.

"And yet you watched it."

Silence.

"I miss Penny," Raj sighed.

"I'm willing to bet that dark matter annihilation signatures are hidden in the extragalactic gamma-ray background."

"But it's composed of many unresolved point sources," warned Raj.

"Aligning previous analyses with my predictions should subtract enough of the expected
contribution from known point-source populations to uncover a signature of dark matter annihilation in galactic dark matter substructures," Sheldon explained.

"Sounds good."

Raj moved to stand next to Sheldon. The two physicists pondered the board.

XxX

Alex spotted Penny by the open workshop door staring into space and ventured over.

"Earth to Penny," he quipped as he waved a hand in front of her face.

"Oh. Hey," she stammered before giving a big smile.

"You okay?" he asked with a slight frown. "You seem off."

"I'm okay," she replied and stretched. "Late night last night. Friend's car broke down on the highway."

"Fair enough. As long as you don't kill yourself today I'll be happy." Here Alex grinned. "I can't budget in an insurance hike."

Penny stuck out her tongue.

XxX

Leonard glanced at his roommate as Sheldon stared out the passenger window.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Leonard asked.

"It's Tuesday. Tuesday is Big Boy night," Sheldon replied.

"Couldn't we go somewhere else? It's getting kinda monotonous having hamburgers every week."

Sheldon turned to glare at his roommate.

"Familiarity makes for a happy digestive tract," he said crisply.

"And a good poop makes for a happy Sheldon," snorted Leonard.

"You make me sound like a child. A healthy colon is crucial to overall good health."

"And a Big Boy is good for your colon?"

"It's not like we're eating at Taco Bell."

"True," Leonard acquiesced. "But it would be different."

"'Different'. Just listen to yourself."

"Well we did something different yesterday and we ended up with a new WoW ally."

"An anomaly doesn't make for a trend," sniffed Sheldon.

"Still, it was fun," shrugged Leonard. "It was like old times."

"How was driving two hours to confront a bully in any way like 'old times'?" Sheldon asked
incredulously.

"I mean it was the gang. You know, Penny and us."

"Oh." A pause and then Sheldon resumed looking out the window.

XxX

"You seemed off today," said Ben as Penny and he sat on his couch watching television.

"I had a little trouble getting to sleep last night," she replied.

"So how did last night go?" he asked innocently.

"Pretty awesome actually," grinned Penny. "We ended up going to this guy's house and he totally recognized me from the show so he gave Sheldon his stuff back."

"That's good."

They continued to watch television.

"Alex got a kick out of it and said that he wanted to meet the guys, and after the Shelbot thing he really wants to meet Sheldon," said Penny.

"Shelbot?"

"Yeah, he built a robot so he could stay in his room."

"Why?"

Penny began to flush. "Who knows?"

A pause and then Ben muted the television.

"I don't think this is a good idea," he said slowly.

"Why not?" frowned Penny. "They're nice guys. Jamie and Adam would get a kick out of them. Besides you met them."

"I remember Sheldon was pretty cold to me."

"He comes off a little anal sometimes," Penny agreed. "But once he gets to know you he relaxes."

She picked up the remote and resumed the sound.

A moment later she muted it.

"How come you never said he was cold before?" she asked.

"Because I didn't know you guys had history then," replied Ben as he took the remote and resumed the sound.

He then muted it.

"You spend a few hours with the guy and the next day you're spaced out," he said.

"It's not like we were alone. Leonard, Howard and Raj were there too," countered Penny.
Ben turned off the television.

"Penny, I'm not stupid and neither are you," he said seriously. "You and Sheldon might do this dance pretending you don't like each other but the bullshit's gotta stop."

"We tried it and it didn't work," she replied equally as serious.

"But you still love him."

"I didn't say that," Penny blanched. "I mean 'love'? I--"

"Let me guess, you've always been attracted to anal retentive geeks," Ben snorted. "Sheldon's one in a long list of guys you've dated. This is nothing special. Plain as a bran muffin."

"He's not a bran muffin; if anything he's a damn pop tart," Penny countered.

"With sprinkles."

"Lots of sprinkles," she agreed and then sighed. "I thought I had a pop tart before but I was so wrong. Kurt cheated on me and my whole world fell apart."

"But you got it back together. Besides any guy who'd cheat on you is not a pop tart. At best he's a toaster strudel." In spite of the situation Penny chuckled. Ben put down the remote. "There was this girl named Jenna and she was friends with this guy who was pretty clueless about dating and romance and so he read about it and asked for advice and did his best but it wasn't enough for her so they broke up and moved on."

"Maybe it wasn't that it wasn't enough for her but that he was trying too hard to be someone he wasn't," Penny replied quietly.

"I can't tell you if Sheldon's the guy for you. All I know is that as long as you're hooked on him you can say goodbye to any kind of relationship with someone else," said Ben. "Well, unless that someone else is a masochist. Which I'm not."

"So what happened to Jenna?" Penny asked.

Ben shrugged. "Dunno. She was only there for the one episode."

Penny's jaw dropped. "Episode?"

"Next Generation," he said with a smirk. "She was dating Data, who's an android."

"I can't believe my life's Star Trek," groaned Penny.

"Your secret's safe with me, oh queen of the geeks," Ben winked.

XxX

Amy woke up to the sound of someone knocking loudly and out of rhythm at her door. She put on her glasses and checked the time. One fourteen.

She got out of bed and put on her housecoat and slippers before venturing to the door. Putting an eye to the peephole her jaw dropped and she immediately opened the door.

"Penny?" she gasped as the Nebraskan, wearing a Green Lantern t-shirt over her dress, nearly fell into the apartment.

"You rat bastard," she slurred.
"Have you been drinking?" Amy asked even though she could smell the alcohol on her friend's breath.

"Ben was a perfectly nice guy and I ruined it 'cause of you and your God-damn pop tart."

"Pop tart?" asked Amy as she led Penny to the couch before scurrying over to close the door.

"I made Sheldon cry, you said. Don't give up on him, you said. And yet Sheldon doesn't want me so what the fuck am I doing?" Penny growled.

"Did you talk to Sheldon tonight?"

"NoPe." Amy inwardly sighed in relief. "But I saw him last night." Penny kicked her feet onto Amy's coffee table. "I had a blast and it was like old times and I was on cloud nine and then he gave me this." She pulled at her t-shirt. "What does this mean?"

"Obviously he misses you," said Amy as she sat next to Penny.

"How am I supposed to date a guy who doesn't want to date?"

"Just because he ran into difficulty doesn't mean that he doesn't want to date you, Penny."

"So just date me already!" Penny gave an exasperated sigh. "I mean it's not like I'm gonna turn him down. Instead he makes this a big production and makes himself something he's not and pops pills to keep sane and--" Penny blanched. "Son of a bitch!" She looked to Amy. "You didn't hear that," she pleaded.

"After Sheldon came back he asked me about studies on anti-anxiety medications and their effects on the brain," Amy said evenly. "He never offered and I never asked but it was naturally easy to deduce that he was prescribed medication."

Penny rubbed her face with her palms. "I can't wait forever for him to get it together."

"Penny, he'll never be a 'normal' boyfriend. He's a child prodigy on the autism spectrum. Maybe what you're expecting from him isn't realistic."

"I think I'm a hell of a lot more realistic than he is. He doesn't need to whisk me off to castles to make me love him," Penny sniffled. "And he sure doesn't have to keep it completely clinical."

"Then it's time you met him half way," Amy said simply. She reached over and grabbed a tissue from the end table and handed it to Penny. "Come on bestie let's get you to bed."

"'Kay." Penny slipped off her shoes and settled herself on Amy's couch.

The neurobiologist took the afghan off the couch back and covered her friend.

xTBBTx

Sheldon was on his bed reading an online article when he heard the slip of paper under his door. He moved his laptop aside and went to retrieve it.

Reinstatement of Friendship Agreement

*This document reinstates the friendship between Sheldon and Penny and all the rights and privileges associated with the Friendship Agreement in addition to the following:
Penny admits that she was an idiot to let Sheldon go without a fight because he is absolutely awesome. She furthermore realizes that he'll always be an anal asshat from time to time and that it doesn't mean that he's being a jerk.

Sheldon cuts himself some slack and accepts the fact that Penny likes him Just The Way He Is so there's no need for him to get a personality transplant. However, this does not exclude him from trying new things on Anything Can Happen Thursdays or Kidnapped Sundays which occur on the first Sunday of the month and entails a road trip to wherever.*

Sheldon's eyes traced the lines of her signature.

XxX

On the other side of the door Penny chewed on her lower lip as she waited.

The paper finally came under the door and she quickly scooped it up.

At the bottom of the page in a neat hand was, 'Dr. Sheldon Cooper'.

Penny practically danced down the hall.

A small smile came to Sheldon's face as he heard her 'Yee-ha!' shout from the living room.

xTBBTx

Indirect dark matter detector: kipacstanfordedukipacresearch

Star Trek: TNG episode where Data dates Jenna: In Theory
"I informed you thusly," growled Sheldon as the guys looked at the long lineup at the theater entrance.

"Relax Sheldon, we've got tickets," said Raj.

"What about the seats?" Sheldon said excitedly. "What chance do we have of finding the acoustic sweet spot when most of the seats will be already taken?"

"Let's just get in line before we end up sitting in the front row," sighed Leonard.

"Then there's the problem of saving a seat for Penny," Sheldon continued as they walked to the back of the line. "This is an unmitigated disaster." His eyes narrowed as he recognized a particular individual in a group that was walking towards them on the sidewalk.

"Hello Sheldon," said Wil Wheaton amiably.

"Wil Wheaton," the physicist replied crisply.

"I see you're out for the Star Trek midnight showing."

"Why else would I be in line?"

Wil looked at the length of the line.

"Should have been here sooner," he said.

"Yes, well, we're ahead of you so perhaps you should have been here sooner," sniffed Sheldon.

"Actually we've got a pass to go in early," grinned Wil. "It's nice to grab the popcorn and a good seat ahead of the crowd, y'know?"

Just then Penny came to the group.

"Man, good thing we got tickets," she whistled.

"Hi Penny," said Wil brightly. "Congrats on the new show. It's awesome!"

"Thanks," she replied. "It's been a blast."

"You seeing Star Trek, too? Didn't think you were a fan."

"Eh, it's Anything Can Happen Thursday so what the heck," she shrugged.

"We're going in early," Wil said. "You can come with us if you like."

"Penny's with us," Sheldon said firmly.

Wil cocked his head at Sheldon and they stared at each other.
"What the hell, they can come too," Wil said with a smile. "More the merrier."

"Awesome!" Leonard cooed.

"No thank you," Sheldon said stiffly.

"What?" Howard gasped.

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. "To accept a 'gift' from my arch nemesis"—here Wil chuckled—"is completely—"

"Anything Can Happen, Sheldon," Penny said with a light bump to his bicep.

"And in the spirit of that we accept," said Leonard and the two groups went to the front.

"Hey Wil," said the security guard. "These guys with you?"

"Hardly," snorted Sheldon. "He's the Green Goblin to my Spider-Man, the Pope Paul the fifth to my Galileo, the Internet Explorer to my Fire-"

"We're with him," Penny said loudly and then grinned at Sheldon's scowl.

The group walked into the theater and went directly to the refreshment stand and ordered. After picking up his Icee and Red Vines and her diet Coke from the counter Sheldon and Penny made their way to the cinema.

Penny marched down to the center of the room before realizing Sheldon wasn't with her.

"Ha!"

She turned to see him sitting near the top.

"Ha!" He called again and then got up and went to another row and sat. "Ha!"

"What are you doing?" Penny asked.

"Finding the acoustic sweet spot," explained Leonard as he came to stand beside her.

"Does he always do this?" she asked as she watched Sheldon continue his quest.

"Be thankful he didn't bring his toy xylophone."

"Here we are!" Sheldon exclaimed and Penny went to join him.

"Happy?" she asked.

"I'm not un—" He caught her 'yeah right' smirk. "I'm satisfied."

"Good. So what's the plot anyhoo?"

"I don't like spoilers," Sheldon replied. "I've been avoiding the Star Trek forums for weeks so as to make this moment all the sweeter."

"Fair enough."

"I also don't like people talking during the film so please refrain from chatter."
"Anything else?" Penny chuckled.

"If you have to use the washroom cut by Leonard. I don't want to miss a moment of screen time."

"Yes boss." She took a sip of her pop.

"I must say, this Anything Can Happen Thursday is working out quite splendidly," Sheldon said cheerily. "When we get the dvd I can point out all the inaccuracies."

"Looking forward to it," Penny said diplomatically.

"Have some faith," Howard said from Sheldon's right. "I mean this won't beat Wrath of Khan, the best Star Trek movie ever, but it'll be light years ahead of—"

"Excuse me, The Voyage Home was far better than Star Trek II," countered Sheldon.

"And First Contact was the best of all," said Wil from behind Sheldon.

"You're prejudiced," scowled Sheldon.

"Oh yeah? What about—"

Penny slunk down in her seat and pulled out her phone.

XxX

"We've finished our discussion," Sheldon said

"'Kay, just a sec," said Penny as she continued to write.

"You can send LOLcats later. The movie's about to start." Sheldon glanced at Penny's screen, noting that she was texting 'Gwen', who had asked if Penny was out at the movies with Ben.

Penny sat up and put her phone away.

"So I take it I can look forward to more 'discussion' at home?" she teased.

"Is there really any doubt?" said Sheldon, making Penny chuckle. The physicist chewed on his bottom lip as he stole a glance at Penny.

"So how's Ben?" he asked evenly.

"He's okay." Pause. "We decided not to see each other."

"Ah," nodded Sheldon. "Is that why we're friends again?"

"No," Penny said firmly. "We're friends again. That's why Ben and I split."

"I see," said Sheldon as the lights went down.

As the screen lit up with a Jolly Ranchers commercial Sheldon leaned close to her ear.

"About time you came to your senses," he said and then straightened in his seat.

Penny leaned over to him. "Whatever Shelbot." She settled into her seat to watch the movie.

The Nebraskan smiled as his breathy "Touché" ticked her ear.
"Okay, so Original Trek over Next Generation but Picard over Kirk," Penny said slowly as Leonard turned off the dvd.

"That's correct," he said. "But that doesn't mean that Next Generation is bad."

"At least the girls didn't have beehive hairdos," Penny chuckled.

"But they did have the mini dress and go-go boots so you take the rough with the smooth," winked Leonard.

"Never knew you were a leg man, Leonard."

"Actually I prefer my breast friends."

"You know if you tell Stephanie that she'll knock your block off." They both chuckled. "So are you nervous?"

"A little," said Leonard. "This time Stephanie and I are going to ease into the relationship." Here he smiled. "You know, no joint bank accounts and moving in together on the second date."

Penny took a sip from her bottled iced tea. "You sure about this?"

"Well, she didn't use me for sex or defect to North Korea. That's a plus."

"True."

He smiled shyly. "She really likes me. She's smart and pretty and funny and—"

"Just no more bird sweaters," Penny warned.

"Or wool pants."

"Although it's a quick way to get you out of them," Penny winked.

"Believe me, with Stephanie that's not a problem." Again they laughed. "So what about you and Sheldon?"

"We're doing okay," said Penny.

"So are you actually dating?"

"Depends on what you mean. If by dating you mean flowers and goodnight smoochies, then no. But if you mean going to Legoland then we're rocking."

"You really are amazing," gushed Leonard.

"It's meeting each other half-way," Penny said seriously. "Speaking of which, Kidnapped Sunday's coming up and I wanna take Sheldon to Disneyland."

"Great!" said Leonard. "I'll pay for the tickets."

"I've got money now, y'know," said Penny.

"It's alright. I promised to take him for his Christmas present. I'm sure spending the day with you instead of me won't dampen the spirit."
"Okay, thanks." Penny leaned back on the couch. "I really can't believe how this year's going. Mythbusters is a hit and Alex wants me out doing more p. r. work during the down time."

"So goodbye Cheesecake Factory?"

"Jamie's taking me on at his shop," Penny smirked. "He figures me 'capable' of doing things without killing myself. It's actually pretty cool because I'll be learning how to do everything from welding to driving robots."

"I can't believe I'm friends with a geek," chuckled Leonard.

"Yeah, yeah, smartass," Penny laughed.

xtBBTx

"Damn, we missed the train," said Penny as she checked the schedule.

"That's alright. It was the C.K. Holliday. The next one's the Ward Kimball," Sheldon said excitedly.

"As long as we get to sit down it's all good. I keep forgetting how big Disneyland is."

"Sixty five hectares," said Sheldon. "Did you know that the Ward Kimball breaks the Disneyland Railroad's tradition of naming engines after Santa Fe officials?"

"So who is he?"

"He was an animator, part of Disney's Nine Old Men. He also founded and led the seven-piece Dixieland band Firehouse Five Plus Two in which he played—"

"Focus, Sheldon," Penny prompted. "Disney. Animation."

Sheldon's mouth twitched. "Kimball created several classic Disney characters including the Crows in Dumbo; Tweedledeum and Tweedledee, the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland; the Mice, Lucifer the Cat and Bruno the Bloodhound from Cinderella; and Jiminy Cricket from Pinocchio. He also received an Academy Award for the short animated cartoon It's Tough To Be a Bird."

"Cool."

In the distance came the sound of a train whistle and Sheldon grinned.

"You're in for a treat," he said excitedly. "The Ward Kimball is a 2-4-4, serial number 20925, built by—"

"Remember our deal: no talking about trains until we're actually on it," said Penny.

The train came into sight.

"Fortunately I have one point five miles in which to 'babble' to my 'heart's content' as you so eloquently phrased it," he replied.

Penny chuckled. "Yeah, I didn't exactly think this one through."

"And now you're attached to another object by an inclined plane wrapped helically around an axis." Penny gave him a quizzical look. "Screwed," he said with a twinkle to his eyes.
"Sheldon!" Penny laughed as she swatted his arm.

"Built by Baldwin Locomotive Works in nineteen oh two," Sheldon continued albeit with amusement in his tone. "For the Laurel Valley Plantation of Louisiana, the Ward Kimball was later—"

XxX

"That was awesome!" Penny gushed as Sheldon and she exited the theater.

"Industrial Light and Magic is world renowned for its special effects," he replied.

"Adam showed me pictures of some of the models he made for Galaxy Quest. Pretty cool stuff."

"I'm hoping that Jamie will introduce you to the finer points of animatronics so we can utilize your new-found knowledge on next year's entry into the Southern California Robot Fighting League Round Robin Invitational."

"The revenge of M.O.N.T.E." Penny exclaimed.

"Two point oh," Sheldon amended. "I've taken your suggestion and will use some of M.O.N.T.E.'s parts to—"

"Excuse me," said a guy in his twenties wearing a double helix symbol on his t-shirt and glasses. His buddy stood beside him with silly smile. "But you're Penny from Mythbusters aren't you?"

"Man, how many people watch Discovery anyhow?" Penny chuckled. "Yeah, that's me."

"That was so cool when you covered that myth about launching a guy with a bottle rocket," said the shorter guy wearing a sweater vest and khaki pants.

"Do you mind if we take a picture?" glasses guy asked.

"Sure," Penny replied amiably.

"Here," glasses guy said to Sheldon as he handed the physicist his phone.

The two men snuggled around Penny and Sheldon took the picture.

"Thanks so much," glasses guy gushed as he took his phone.

"You're welcome," Sheldon replied.

"I meant Penny for taking the picture with us."

"No problem. Thanks for watching," Penny said and lightly nudged Sheldon to get him moving.

"Didn't expect getting that out here," she said as they walked. "I mean conventions, sure, but at Disneyland?"

"Geeks are everywhere," Sheldon replied evenly. "Considering that California is home to Silicon Valley, special effects studios and ComiCon you shouldn't be surprised if you garner more recognition as the show continues."

"Speaking of recognition, there's Goofy!" Penny said excitedly.

Sheldon stopped dead.
"No Goofy," he said seriously.

"Okay sweetie," Penny said gently and the pair turned and went in another direction. "So where do you want to go?"

"I'm peckish for something sweet," said Sheldon.

"How 'bout we get some churros?"

"That's acceptable." His eyes widened as a thought came to him. "Then we can go to Space Mountain!"

"Whatever floats your boat," Penny grinned.

XxX

"Oh boy!" said Sheldon excitedly as he stepped into the Mad Hatter hat shop. Penny wiped the bottom of her shoe outside the door before following.

"Besides the railroad hat I don't think I've seen you wear anything on your head," she said as she took a Donald Duck hat off the shelf and put it on Sheldon's head. "Now you can be a sailor!"

"Hardly," he replied as he took it off and put the hat back on the shelf. "Especially since there can only be one hat to get when one is at Disneyland."

They went to the back of the store where the embroiderer was busily working away.

"Have a hat in mind?" the man asked.

With a smile Sheldon handed him Mickey Mouse ears.

"Print your name on the card." Sheldon obliged and then the man began his work scribing Sheldon's name in gold thread.

"Never took ya for a Mickey Mouse man," said Penny.

"Actually I'm more of a Loony Tunes fan but how can one resist the big mouse ears?"

The man handed Sheldon the ears and immediately the physicist put it on.

"You know they actually suit you?" Penny chuckled.

Sheldon was pleased and the pair went to the cash.

"Is that everything?" asked the cashier.

"Let me get it," said Penny as she opened her purse. "You are way too adorable to be paying for your own ears."

"Why thank you Penny," Sheldon replied happily. "I—" His eyes widened. "They have Mickey Mouse hands!"

Penny switched her money for her credit card.

"Go get 'em," she said and like a shot Sheldon was off.

After paying she went to Sheldon, who stood by the door wearing his Mickey Mouse hands and
"The fireworks will be starting soon," he said.

"After you," she replied and the pair began to walk in the direction of the Castle.

"Sorry about your shoe," Sheldon said.

"It's okay. Now we know: churros and Space Mountain don't mix," smirked Penny. It took a handful of napkins and Sheldon's antibacterial wipes but she was sure she got most of his vomit off her shoe. Still, there was a bit of an odor so the shoes were most definitely going straight for a soaking when she got home.

They got to the bridge but it was full of people and so they went over by the trees to watch the fireworks.

"Thank you for today," Sheldon glanced at his companion. "It was f-u-n."

Penny chuckled. "I'm glad."

A noise and then a giant blue explosion filled the night sky followed by red and yellow. Penny was watching the colored showers and circles and spinners when she felt a soft bump against her hand. She looked to see one of Sheldon's Mickey Mouse fingers just as it poked her hand again. When it did so a third time she grabbed it before flashing Sheldon a grin. To her surprise he was already looking at her. He gave her a slight nod and then returned to the festivities.

"Hand in 'hand' they watched the fireworks fly."

xTBBTx

"So what should the teams be?" asked Leonard as the gang assembled at the bowling lanes.

"We could be couples," Bernadette suggested.

"Or guys versus gals," said Stephanie.

"I'd prefer mixed teams," said Sheldon. He turned to Penny. "In this case your lack of femininity will work to our advantage."

"Oh, I think it's definitely guys versus girls," the Nebraskan replied with an evil smile.

"Very well," said Sheldon as he clasped his hands behind his back. "However I feel I should inform you that I was the co-captain of the East Texas Christian Youth Holy Roller Bowling League championship team. Seven to twelve-year-old division."

For her part Penny marched over and picked up a ball from the rack. She paused a moment to aim before letting the ball go. The pins collapsed in a strike.

"Game on, Moonpie," Penny smirked.

"Don't call me Moonpie!" Sheldon shot back as he took up a ball. He aimed and then threw a strike. "Only Meemaw calls me that," he said haughtily.

Penny and Sheldon glared at each other for a moment before as one they turned from each other and went to their perspective teams.

"We are so doomed," Howard murmured to Leonard.
"Oh damn!" squeaked Bernadette as her ball hit the remaining pins. A moment and then they were down. "Yes!"


"Sheldon, keep in mind I could very easily merge the Ebola virus with the common cold," Bernadette warned.

"I have cow brains that were affected by bovine spongiform encephalopathy," piped in Amy.

"I have access to lethal drug combinations," Stephanie offered.

They all turned to Penny. She winked at Sheldon as she cracked her knuckles.

"Now I remember why I quit bowling," murmured Sheldon.

"Say, is that Stuart?" Raj asked Howard.

"I believe so and, hey! That's Wil Wheaton!" replied the engineer.

"Yeah, Wil plays in the card tournaments at the store."

Howard waved at Stuart, who came over.

"Hey guys," he said amiably.

"Nice to see you out of the comic shop," grinned Raj.

"Yeah. I figure I could just as easily not make money here as opposed to staying open and lose money," Stuart said in his usual self-deprecating tone.

"Strike!" Penny called out from the lane. "Eat that, sucka!"

"I see Penny's here," the comic book owner continued. "I've seen her show online. It's pretty neat. You think her and her cast-mates could do a signing at the store at some point?"

"That'd be cool," said Raj. "I'd love to meet Jamie. Actually Penny's working for him now so we're hoping for an after work party or barbecue to meet him."

"Meet who?" asked Wil as he and his two companions came over.

"Penny's cast-mates."

"That'd be awesome," said Wil. "I've been at Robot Wars a couple of times and people there still talk about Blendo."

Sheldon ventured over to the group with a frown on his face.

"Gentlemen," he said formally. "Wil Wheaton." He turned to the engineer. "Howard, you're next and you're not limbering up. Get with the game, man!"

"Yeah, yeah." Howard and Raj went to the lane.
"I'll go ask Penny," said Stuart and he went over to the seating area.

Sheldon raised an eyebrow as he watched Stuart say hello to the Nebraskan. "Ask Penny what?"

"If she could bring Adam and Jamie to the comic shop sometime for autographs," said Wil.

"Ah."

"Still, it's nice she's spending time with you guys before you drift apart."

"We're not 'drifting apart,'" Sheldon countered.

"Not yet. But it'll happen." Here Wil sighed. "There was a group of friends I was close with before my career took off. Then with the shows and interviews and conventions I got busy. I mean it wasn't like I was trying to avoid them. It just got harder for us to connect, y'know?"

"Penny's show isn't mainstream."

"Yeah, but she's hot and funny and can hit a target at a thousand feet. All she needed was a chance and believe you me producers will be looking her way." Wil clapped a hand on Sheldon's shoulder. "Just enjoy this while it lasts."

Sheldon stared at Penny. Watched her hands wave as she talked. The way her hair moved across her shoulders.

"Just enjoy this while it lasts."

Feeling his panic rising, Sheldon raced from the room.

XxX

From the rooftop of 2311 Los Robles Sheldon picked out Mars in the night sky. It was snuggled in close to the--her lips soft and he wanted--and its ruddy reddish color distinguished it from Saturn. He remembered the first time he saw Mars from his telescope back in Texas. How he wished he could see it firsthand. Be away from his parents' yelling and—"It just got harder for us to connect, y'know?"—his siblings' teasing.

Alone.

Only this time he didn't want to be.

"Wishes an' horses, Moonpie," he murmured in a heavy accent reminiscent of his Meemaw.

He took a breath and slowly let it out his mouth before heading down the stairs to his apartment. Sheldon dug into his pocket for his keys and unlocked the door. Inside his goldfish darted their colors in their bowl until he turned on the light—and found Penny sitting on the couch.

"You're in my spot," he said quietly as he slipped off his shoes.

"You took off without saying goodbye," she replied. "Gotta quit doing that, sweetie."

"I needed time to myself."

"That's fine. Just tell me next time." Penny cocked her head. "Wanna tell me what's going on in that beautiful mind of yours?"

"March first, two thousand and six. You said hello to me."
"Best thing I ever did," Penny smiled.

"I had no desire for friendship but you wouldn't take no for an answer," Sheldon said.

"And here we are." Penny waited but Sheldon said nothing. "You're not sorry we're friends are you?"

"I'm not sure," he said honestly. "Before I met you I was alone and seemingly content but then you came into my life and nothing's been the same. Chaos. Uncertainty." He snorted. "'Anything Can Happen' whenever you're here, third Thursday of the month or not." Pause. "I never know what to expect from you and that unnerves me. And yet you brought me Comic Book Wednesdays and my couch. Paintball. Putt-putt. Leonard."

"Rough with the smooth," she agreed as she stood.

"I hope I've been a positive influence."

Penny smiled. "Sheldon, you've been amazing. I wouldn't have gotten the show without you. Or understood what I was talking about."

He nodded. "So I've fulfilled my end of the Agreement."

"You're making it sound like a job," Penny said, her smile fading. "Just because I'm going places doesn't mean I'm gonna leave you behind."


"Like Hell," she growled and crossed the room in three strides in order to grab Sheldon and pulled him into a fierce kiss. His lips were hesitant but for a moment before they began to move with hers. Sheldon rose to his full height, arcing Penny's neck even as he pressed close to her body in order to maintain contact.

As one they parted lips but stayed in each other's presence.

"I love you, Dr. C.," Penny said. "And someday I'm going to hear that back from you clean and clear and it'll be awesome." She smiled. "But this is pretty cool, too."

"Penny," he said slowly. "I don't know if I can be what you need."

"You already are, genius. Like I said before, I'll take you any way you'll let me."

A moment and then he nodded and she dove into a hug. Penny took in everything from the way her hands bunched his shirts to the smell of talc on his body. Then his hand lightly patted her back and she let her heart drum to its beat before letting go.

"Sorry about that," she blushed.

"Never apologize for being you," Sheldon said. His mouth twitched. "You've irrevocably altered my life."

"For the better, hopefully."

"For the better," he agreed. He cocked his head. "Query, what did you mean I should say I love you 'clean and clear'?"
Penny chuckled. "Well, you already said you loved me but I'm not sure it counts since you were in the middle of a nervous breakdown."

"Ah. So either I was debilitated by mental illness or else I do love you," Sheldon said slowly.

"Something like that."

He clasped his hands behind his back and regarded Penny although his eyes crinkled in amusement. "You know my mother had me tested."

She grinned.

xtBBT

Wikipedia: Ward Kimball; Disneyland Railroad

physicsclassromcom: Newton's Laws of Motion
Epilogue

Reference to and dialogue from: 'The Flaming Spittoon Acquisition'

Penny opened her mailbox and retrieved her letters and flyers. As she sorted through them she was surprised to find a letter addressed to her in a familiar hand. She closed her box and shoved the rest of her mail in her purse and proceeded to open the letter as she climbed the stairs.

Several times Penny came to a halt as she processed what she was reading.

"Un-boleevable," she mumbled and then quickened her steps until she got to her floor. Without fanfare she opened the door to 4A where Sheldon and Leonard were cleaning up after a night of Halo.


"Do I want to know?" chuckled Leonard.

"Don't ask me," Sheldon shrugged. "Perhaps Penny's menstrual cycle has come early."

The lanky physicist crossed the hallway to Penny's open door.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Across the room Penny watched and waited.

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

Knock Knock Knock "Penny."

"Come in," she said and he obliged. "Okay," she said and held out the letter. "What's this?"

"I thought it was obvious," he replied evenly.

"'You can't keep your apartment organized. I label all my possessions.' 'You're off-key when you sing me Soft Kitty. I can play the piano, theramin and recorder.' 'You talk with your mouth full. I use five napkins when I eat.'" Penny gave a crooked smile. "Not exactly flattering."

"It wasn't meant to be flattering," said Sheldon. "They're observations."

"Go on."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "You see I was thinking about our paradigm. We balance each other out. For instance, I've provided guidance and organization and you reply with nonsense and chaos." Sheldon's eyes flashed to Penny's amused expression. "Together we are an equilibrium and it's therefore to our benefit to continue this in a more formalized relationship."

"Wait, let me get this straight: you love me but we're not going out?"

"Well, we didn't file the proper paperwork." Penny snorted. "Now may I continue?"

"By all means," she said with a smirk.
"To this end, I propose that we enter into a Relationship Agreement which will enhance rather than override our existing Friendship Agreement. For instance, I wouldn't object to us not referring to each other as 'just friends'."

"Well that's big of you."

"Relationships aren't without sacrifice and compromise," he said matter-of-factly.

"Well," Penny said as she looked over the letter. "You've kinda got the sentiment even if the execution's off." She folded the paper. "Your proposal is logical and sound."

"Of course," Sheldon replied with a smug smile.

"Well I suppose that only leaves you asking me out," she said, her smile impish.

"I already have."

"No, what I have is a proposal. I want the feeling and the asking," she said firmly albeit amiable.

"Alright," said Sheldon. "I look forward to seeing you more than the conclusion to a two-part Doctor Who. I value your friendship more than my Flash 123. I trust you to have my back when we play paintball. You're my preferred Halo partner. I drove a motor vehicle for you."

"Okay, I get it Sheldon," Penny chuckled.

"You accepted me when others would push me away," he said seriously.

"Their loss is my gain," she replied.

"Good." He cleared his throat. "Now, I'll have to simplify some of the language but—"

"The asking, Sheldon."

"Oh for Heaven's sake," he said with an eye roll.

Penny smiled sweetly. Sheldon took a deep breath, clearly unimpressed.

"Penny," he said slowly. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

"Yup."

"I'll go write up the Agreement."

"I can add things to it too," said Penny.

"Agreed," nodded Sheldon.

"Thanks Moonpie."

He frowned. "Don't call me Moonpie."

"Compromise, Sheldon." He glared. She grinned. "You gonna tell me why your Meemaw calls you that?"

"Never," he said stiffly.

"Maybe I should call your mother and ask," she teased.
Sheldon pursed his lips. "Is this the type of treatment I can expect in a relationship?"

"It's worse," Penny winked.

"Wonderful," he said sarcastically as he exited the apartment.

"Penny girl, what have you gotten yourself into?" the Nebraskan chuckled.

xTBBTx

A/N: And I must leave it here if for no other reason than I haven't really seen enough of seasons 5-7 to incorporate them into the story. Perhaps I'll bite the bullet and go over them so I can add to this story. After all, the hard part is over and Sheldon and Penny are together. For safety's sake I'll label this story as 'complete'.

Regardless, I hope you agree with me that these early episodes are amazing—and that they could have been written in such a way that romantic Shenny could happen without losing the interesting plot lines and punch lines. For those who are disillusioned with the current show I say don't forget what brought you here to read (and write!) fan fiction—your love for the characters. Each writer in Shenny fiction offers an alternative to what's currently on the air, allowing Sheldon and Penny to freely flow together as they did in the early seasons.

And for those who say that the Shenny just isn't possible I'd like to point out that there are an infinite number of universes out there with an infinite number of Sheldons and Pennys. This story is but one of them. Thank you for reading and for your reviews. *Lynn

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!