

Aftershocks

by mazaher

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*Here it is, the mandatory post-The Great Game/pre-season 2 speculative piece.
(How it reminds me of the good old times before a certain Devil whose name begins with M made his metaphysical appearance... and no, the name is bisyllable, but he's not Mycroft).
Warning: what lays ahead is mostly bad medical protocol, ludicrous dialogue, and I never planned for John to run away philosophising at the end.
Oh well.*

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Image and info credits (accessed June 17th, 2011):

http://www.ehow.com/how_8044344_join-lawsuit-against-marlboro-lights.html

<http://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/preparedness/primer.pdf>

http://www.infobarrel.com/Media/Porsche_Boxter_Car_Accident

<http://bringatrailer.com/2010/12/29/giant-killer-1964-lotus-26r-vintage-racer/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:KandaharUniversity-Mosque-2005.JPG>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optical_illusion

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_contours

...and the teapot and cups are mine.

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Day 1

Sherlock and John

(Black)

Lestrade

Smoke curls upward in the cool evening air as Lestrade draws the first puff from the eighteenth Marlboro Light in his packet.

He's come to hate the whoosh of the automatic doors as he steps through --for the twenty-first time a moment ago-- when he can't sit still anymore in the deserted waiting room outside Surgery and even pacing is not enough, so he escapes outside and has one (or two, or three) smokes in the yard.

He pockets the lighter and hunches his shoulders, one hand in his pocket, the other holding on to the cigarette as to a lifeline.

He'd been clean for 19 months, thanks to regular use of nicotine patches plus a dose of healthy competition with Sherlock.

Now he's smoked as a salmon again.

But it's not Sherlock's fault.

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Day 2

John

The first time John wakes up, it's just for a few moments.

There is a low buzzing in his ears, a sharp pain through his chest, and decidedly too much light when one of his puffy eyelids flutters half-open. The other, he discovers, is sewn shut.

An alarm beeps, someone comes near. A cool sensation crawls up his right arm, a hard knot forms in his throat, and down again he floats.

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Day 3

Sherlock

Sherlock starts awake with a panicked shudder which contracts his back and legs, leaving him breathless from the effort and sending some alarm next to the bed into a fit of beeping he doesn't hear, because his eardrums are blasted.

A warm hand presses on his forehead, a mask is strapped to his face, and as the blessed tingle of oxygen fills what's left of his lungs, he slips into unconsciousness.

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Day 4

John

"Concussion, comminuted fractures of five ribs, aspiration pneumonia after almost drowning... embolism is now under control. Left eye healing well after extraction of the steel splinters; as you see, the stitches have been removed. Mild middle ear damage, in course of remission. Bad rhabdomyolysis plus renal contusion, that's the most critical at the moment."

There is a voice speaking in a low tone somewhere around the foot of the bed. At first the words are mere noise, layered onto the continuous buzz, but a moment later their meaning begins to come into slow focus.

A deeper voice, clipped and tense, answers: "Contact me every hour, or if there is any change."

Any change in what?

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Day 4, later

Sherlock

Something nibbles at the edge of his sleep, until the bubble breaks and he wakes up. It feels like falling.

He's stretched long on a relatively giving surface.

Sofa?

No, this surface is longer, no need to fold his legs.

Not his sofa?

Wrong.

Very wrong.

Need to get up and look around. Need to think.

Someone is coming. Who? Don't want to be touched. Skin hurts.

Don't...

All fades to black.

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Day 4, later still

John

At one point, things seem to clear out.

John opens his eyes, waking like from a good night's sleep, and while he immediately realises that what woke him is pain, he also feels ...normal. In a measure.

He looks up at the ceiling: whitish, low. Clean. Not home, then.

Two breaths, and he turns very slowly his head to the right: machinery, now silent, pale green walls, a small four-door locker.

Hospital.

Again.

He begins to sigh, but stops when a stab of pain goes through his left ribs.

One minute later it's getting better. John looks to his left, and there he is. Sherlock, on a bed, sleeping.

Relief chokes him for a moment, until he notices that Sherlock is deadly pale under a tangle of tubes: decidedly too pale, under too many tubes.

A nurse approaches.

"Feeling better?"

His mouth is dry and raspy and he can't speak. The nurse offers him small sips of cool delicious water.

"Pr.. *cough* Probably. What about Mr. Holmes?" he mumbles.

"He was worse off than you were, and prognosis is still reserved, but... I shouldn't say it... I think he'll make it."

John knows better than to disregard the opinion of a good emergency ward nurse. As the painkiller once again floods him with a fog of drowsiness through the IV, he reflects that things could be worse.

Much worse.

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Day 5

Sherlock

The next time Sherlock wakes up, the first thing his eyes bring into focus is John. Near (How near? Approximately three feet two inches).

In bed.

Supine.

Immobile.

Sherlock struggles to pull himself seated but chokes inside the mask; his heartbeat races.

John opens his eyes, looks at him and smiles.

A nurse hurries in, takes the mask off, tries to soothe him with words he doesn't hear, but Sherlock only lies back down again when John mouths to him "It's all right. Lie still. I'm fine."

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Day 5, later

Sherlock and John

"John... John!"

"Yes. Here."

"John!"

"Look, I'm here. Can you hear me?"

Sherlock frowns.

"Yes... Maybe. Say something."

"It's good to see you."

"There's a noise... Do you hear it?"

"It's your eardrums. Tinnitus. It should get better in time."

"I want to touch you".

"Same here... Ouch. Can't. Sorry."

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Day 5, later still

John

Morphine makes John talk.

He remembers it happened in Afghanistan, in the early days after he was shot, and it's the same now.

He tries to control himself, but sometimes he's just too high to mind what he says and who hears him.

He doesn't even notice that Sherlock is listening intently.

"You're so tall and thin and collected. As though everything you are was held tight within the boundaries of your physical self. As though there was no safe place outside. As though keeping it all inside could make you invulnerable... But you're not. Not invulnerable. Not in the least. That's why I shot the cabbie. You were going to allow death in, the pill... I could not let it happen. Not to you, no."

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Day 6

John

They are in the same room.

Whenever he's awake, John can turn his head and look at Sherlock. John makes a note to himself to thank whoever it was (Lestrade, Mycroft?) that pulled strings in order to keep them together.

The buzzing in his ears is slowly fading, so now he can hear when Sherlock coughs (aspiration pneumonia), when he cramps awake (muscle tearing, mild spinal injury and, John suspects, nightmares) and when he moans in pain as he tries to roll over on the mattress (abdominal hemorrhage, full thickness burns on his hands, arms and chest, grazing shot to his neck).

The moans especially tear John's heart out, but on the whole what he's seeing allows him to hope for the best. They'll both live.

Probably.

It's early yet to think about permanent consequences.

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Day 7

John and Sherlock

They're tapering off John's morphine. Sherlock is still on high doses. Despite that, he can't relax.

"You know, I think we're safe enough here." John reminds him. "What with both Lestrade and your brother keeping watch."

"I get nervous whenever somebody comes in. I hate feeling nervous."

"Moriarty is dead."

"But he may have left others behind. They may try to get at us here."

"Then we'd die together."

"They may kill only one of us."

"I hope it's me."

"I'd die."

"You can't die just because you've decided to."

"It's hard enough to keep breathing as it is."

"Anyway, in the reverse case, I have my pistol."

"All right, it's settled then."

"Quite settled. You can sleep now."

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Day 9

John and Mycroft plus Sherlock

Sherlock's burns are infected. Things are suddenly so bad that Mycroft comes to visit.

John is awake, Sherlock half-asleep and mumbling to himself, high as a kite on drugs and fever.

"I can do it... I can do it in third gear... I'll give you dust, just wait and see!"

Mycroft turns to John with a thin, tight-lipped smile.

"He's remembering that time when the Porsche 911 spun out with him on the last turn before home. Mother has always been a bit of a Hun as cars are concerned. I had warned him that it felt a tad understeering with power on, but he's never listened to reason."

Before John can answer, Sherlock raises his voice: "I hear you, you know. And it was you who threw a rod on Pater's Lotus 26, trying to pass me on the stretch after the bridge."

"Is this why he never drives now?" John asks.

"Indeed. We had his licence revoked. Damage control, you see."



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Day 10

John and Lestrade

Sherlock is better, the infection is receding. His hands will scar deeply, but it seems he's going to regain full function.

He's down at Imaging for a spinal MRI when Lestrade comes in bringing good news, together with a whiff of rainy London air and cigarette smoke.

"DNA testing confirmed that Moriarty is dead. Donovan sends her wishes. How are you feeling? And what about Sherlock?"

"He's a bit better, from how impatient he's getting. I'm rather fine. They say I should be good enough to try and stand in a couple of weeks." A pause. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Sure. What?"

"I know what happened up to a certain point. But I can't remember when Sherlock shot the semtex... Next thing I knew I was underwater and the ceiling was falling and I couldn't find him. Then I woke up here. Can you tell me more?"

"When we got there, you were holding his nose out of the water, in the three inches available under the concrete rafters which had fallen across the pool. Pulling you both out was a bit of a mess. You were half-drowned yourself, but you didn't let go of him... Anderson caught the one surviving sniper as she was trying to sneak away out of a window in the men's loo. She said that Sherlock had grabbed you by the collar and thrown you into the pool half a second before shooting. That's why he got the worst of the blast and the burns. That's also why the snipers missed you, and only scratched him. His move threw them off their aim and their timing. If he hadn't, he would be dead now. You'd both be dead. It seems you saved each other's lives."

"He tends to do that, doesn't he?"

"You, too. It's a good thing you're taking care of each other. We seem to be always late on you."

"Neither of us would be alive if not for you. Thanks, from us both."

"You're welcome."

John smiles.

Lestrade smiles back.

Day 10, later

John and Mycroft

The news Mycroft brings are not so good. It seems a Colonel Sebastian Moran was Moriarty's chief of operations, and is now possibly (probably) planning for revenge.

"But we're keeping him under surveillance, constantly." Mycroft sounds apologetic. John frowns.

"Are we safe here?"

"I'd say you are. Things may get slightly more complicated when you'll be back in Baker Street, but by then we'll have a proper search done and a security system installed. What about Sherlock? If I'm not mistaken, he's worried about his hands."

"His right hand should be fully functional in a few more weeks. The left will need more physiotherapy before the burned tendon in the thumb heals completely, but he should be able to play the violin again within three or four months. The scars will show, however."

"He will have a good excuse to keep shaking hands with his glove on. Rather infuriating, isn't it? He does it for spite, obviously. Mother has always been so *keen* about manners. 'Take your hat off in front of a lady or inside a private house, but never, ever let the lining of your hat be seen when you salute; keep your jacket on and your shirt buttoned in front of strangers; be the first to walk in when you enter a public place with a lady; always take your glove off before shaking hands...'" he chants. "All medieval rubbish if you ask me, although comparatively harmless. Gloves protect both handshakers actually, from infections if not from blade wounds. But Sherlock makes a point of going *à rebours*, so to speak. He doesn't wear a hat; doesn't wear a necktie; never goes anywhere with a lady; and he does keep his gloves on. Oh well, times change. Few people mind that stuff nowadays. Most don't even know the rules anymore."

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Day 15

Sherlock and John

John is dreaming.

It's not a nightmare, not really, but it's a fine line before it becomes one.

He's in Kandahar, outside the University Mosque, rising like an improbable light-blue Fabergé egg from the bleak rubble of the square. He can smell the Lowala river further away. Strange how rivers have a personal scent...

It's dusk and there's someone with him, someone he can't quite see, who follows him on his left side and whom he must lead to safety before nightfall, but where? The mosque doors are bolted, the quad is deserted. He must remain calm; it is somehow imperative that he keeps the person with him from becoming anxious, but he can't think of any place they can reach on foot in time. He looks around: no shelter anywhere. His heartbeat picks up... He wakes up at a small noise, an indrawn breath. He turns to his left, still unsure if he's still dreaming.



And he sees Sherlock.

Two slow tears slipping along his cheeks.

"I woke you up. I'm sorry."

His voice is cool and steady, but his face is not, and he knows because he now painfully draws a bandaged arm across his eyes.

John fights against his dream, trying to clear his head enough for effective thinking in the real world.

"What happens? Where does it hurt? Want me to call the nurse?"

"No need. I'm fine. I'm just so *stupid!* You were right, that time at Bart's. I was wrong saying what I did about Molly's boyfriend. Moriarty was there in front of me: I looked, and I did not see what mattered, I only saw what he wanted me to see. It was a test, and I failed twice, spectacularly. I focused on the man's sexual orientation, which is irrelevant, and missed his identity, which was essential: error of parallax. And I didn't even question the stereotyped hints he gave me: error of method. I took the bait hook sink and line, no better than Anderson would have done, for heaven's sake. I allowed myself to think like everybody else..."

"Sherlock. Sherlock!"

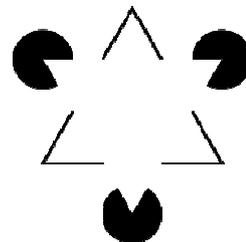
"...Or rather, not think at all. So *stupid*. I almost got ourselves killed. Almost got *you* killed. People are not supposed to survive a semtex explosion indoor. I should have died. Why didn't

you let me die? You should have. I'm no use to anybody. The world is full of idiots already, who needs one more? Not you, I'm sure."

"Sherlock, look at me."

John is wide awake now, functioning in emergency mode, and when he speaks in this tone, his words are not questioned. Sherlock falls silent and lets his arm slip back on the bed. After a moment he turns and their eyes meet.

"Bad news, Sherlock. You're a human being. Your brain is a precision instrument, but a human brain nonetheless. You see mirages on hot tarmac like everybody else. You either see the two black faces or the white vase, and you can't *not* see the Kanizsa triangle. It is the very limits of your brain that make it so powerful. For once, you forgot about the limits. You forgot that even your brain is the result of millions of years of evolution. But we're still here, you and I, and Moriarty is not. Whatever you may think or feel, this is enough for me... And now, let's sleep."



A pause.

"...All right. Sleep well, John."

"Sleep well, Sherlock."

John curls on his right side, his back to Sherlock, and two minutes later he's asleep. He dreams of the mosque again, but now the doors are open. He and Sherlock enter barefoot in the vast lonely empty silence.

Sherlock watches John sleeping for a long time before falling asleep in his turn.

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Day 36

John and Sherlock

The door clicks shut. Regular footfalls composedly descend the seventeen steps to the front door. It creaks open, then close, with a purposeful small slam. An engine purrs louder on the street and recedes. Mycroft is gone.

"It's good to be home." John looks around with a small smile, taking in the surroundings.

Unusually spotless. Mrs. Hudson has been busy.

"It would be even better if my things hadn't been tampered with, and I bet my store of mole samples from human specimens of different ethnic origins isn't..." Sherlock flops himself backwards on the sofa and winces at the ripple of pain along his spine and right leg, which however doesn't even slow him down. "...usable anymore, always provided our landlady-not-our-housekeeper hasn't thrown them away. Do you have the vaguest idea how hard it is to collect an amount sufficient for serious study?..."

"Hm-mm," John nods. "Move over, like a good fellow," he says, and Sherlock pulls his knees up to make room for him. John limps to the sofa, sits next to Sherlock's feet and slides his hand up along his thigh in a soothing massage over his thin trousers. The contact seems to have a calming effect on Sherlock; at least he shuts up.

"Better?"

"Quite."

"Comfortable enough?"

"...No."

"What's up?"

Sherlock mumbles something, his face turned away.

"What?" John inquires.

Sherlock raises his eyes.

"I don't feel safe. I don't feel **we** are safe. Even with my brother and Her Majesty's Government keeping watch outside our door. I can't understand. I never felt like this before. I thought it would pass once out of hospital. Damn irrational. How did you make it? After what happened to you ...the other time?"

John looks at him for a long moment, lips pressed, thinking.

"What I saw in Afghanistan... It wasn't just war... death in battle. There was so much more, Sherlock. There was so much death all around, for so many different reasons. Doctors are

supposed to be acquainted with death, but what we normally see is death in hospitals. Civilised, so to speak. Ultimately as lethal as any other, but varnished with an illusion of being controlled, tamed. Over there I saw death raw, and much of it hadn't even anything to do with the war, or with human beings. Death in its natural state is startling. You and I have grown up in a time and place where mankind feels so powerful. What I saw there shot the idea to pieces. There is damn little anyone can actually do and be reasonably sure to be safe. Once I woke up and realised I had been spared, I also realised the next time, or the one after that, I would not be. Something, at some point, is going to get me."

John shifts on the sofa, turning toward Sherlock. He puts a hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat picking up.

"So no, we are not safe. But I am here. Moriarty's dead. His friend will also die. At some point."

"And meanwhile..."

"Meanwhile, what I can do is watch on you as long as I can. And I know you'll be doing the same."

"Right."

"Right. Tea?"

"Brilliant."

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