

To stop a Bandersnatch

by mazaher

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This story owes to a train of reflections started by irisbleufic's *Drabbles of Solstice*, #6 at <http://irisbleufic.livejournal.com/255955.html> (the one I call *The Swan Story*, and which imo is very much in character, although rather disturbing).

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Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, is not a compassionate man.

He tends to look down on the grief of his fellows.

It distracts him from what, in his opinion, really matters after a crime has been committed: finding facts, fitting them all in a pattern, and catching the perpetrator.

That, he reasons, is what can be done; that is what must be done, and he does it better than anybody.

Anything else is wishful thinking. A waste of his faculties.

After John was invited to follow him that memorable first night (and he's not quit trotting after him since), he has repeatedly tried to make Sherlock see the point in compassion, or at least in sympathy, but all in vain.

"Sherlock, she's a mother who's lost her only child in a street shooting. He was only nine months old, for God's sake! You can't just tell her to shut up."

"I'm gathering evidence which will send the murderer to jail for life, and she's disturbing me. She's young enough to have another child to coddle within a year, and when I'll have finished here, it will have a chance to live safer than the dead one. Whose tender age doesn't really matter by the way, now does it? So do shut up, the both of you, and let me do my work."

John thinks that sometimes Sherlock's sounds (more than a little frighteningly) like Jehova in the Book of Job.

Lately, John has downsized his goals to having Sherlock just apply basic good manners and bite back the most hurtful outbursts. To the both of them, to say nothing of Lestrade, the result sounds and feels a little bit false, but as a marginal quota of feelings seem to be spared all around, it does count a result... of sorts.

Then, all of a sudden, everything changes.

As Sherlock pulls him down and into the pool with him after shooting at the semtex-stuffed coat, one of Moriarty's marksmen hits John straight through the chest.

Sherlock himself is semiconscious and half-drowned as Lestrade dives in and pushes him out of the pool, where chlorinated water is mixing with dust and rubbish from the ceiling and with more ominous, dark red swirls.

John is whisked away in an ambulance, soaked in his own blood, and segregated in Intensive Care.

When Sherlock comes to, more or less patched-up, he is simultaneously informed that John's life is in grave danger, and forbidden to see him.

He escapes twice from his bed.

The first time it's mid-afternoon, just 43 minutes after he's woken up following surgery on his fractured femur, and he doesn't go far along the crowded corridor before he's caught and brought back, cursing and screaming and raising an egregious ruckus.

The second time it's the dead of night, and he manages to drag along his plaster-casted leg, three plates and fifteen screws and all, silently enough to take a lift to the 12th floor and reach the opaque glass doors to IC.

The doors are locked.

He's found two hours later by a nurse stepping out after her shift. He's half-passed out on the nearest one in the row of uncomfortable plastic chairs lining the hall, his face wet with what look suspiciously like tears.

He's the first to find the phenomenon surprising.

His immediate reaction is berating himself for weeping like a child from the pain in his leg-- even if, now that he comes to think of it, it is the absolute most searing, mind-numbing pain he's ever felt in his life so far.

But after he's tucked again in his bed, stuffed with IV painkillers and threatened with ties on his wrists if he tries another such stunt (ties will actually be applied early the next morning, when he'll be found splayed on the floor, breathless and gasping after a new attempt), even then he finds himself plagued with a hard knot in his throat, a ragged breath, and an unsettling need to burst into sobs, all of which he can't quite curb.

He knows his talents lie in dealing with facts in the outside world.

Those he can handle: he picks them up and apart, he catalogues them, he shifts them around on his mental billboard until they click into each other, forming an image, most often geometrical, regular and four-dimensional.

But now this one fact: *Sherlock Holmes is crying like his heart is broken*, this one fact is logically, inevitably, implacably leading him to investigate to the inside.

It is unknown, insidious territory.

It is a foreign city where he doesn't speak the language.

He feels like his usually keen eyesight keeps slipping slightly out of focus.

Outlines are blurred.

Data questionable.

What is this feeling, like his heart is being ripped out of his chest with a blunt knife and cut into pieces while it's still beating?

And this desperate anger at his own helplessness?

He used to be good at finding things out. At finding criminals. He believed he was doing something useful (the only useful thing he ever thought he was able to do).

But now, now he's bed-ridden, and he can't run after Jim Moriarty, find him, and kill him with his bare hands, and he's not allowed near John who could be dead any minute now (John who's never heard Sherlock say *I love you, you know*), and he can't even do anything about this bleeding from his heart and this tearing from his eyes, because he's lost inside this hellish inner world of shadows and hushed murmurs in a language he doesn't understand, of watery sounds and heaving breaths, of slow dripping and of sudden, paralysing fear and of dead silences after his screams.

Sherlock has always known what lays beneath the surface of things.

Someone once called it "a morally neutral casualty of unimaginable violence".

He's fought hard for most of his life in order to forget about it, or at least keep himself from stepping too near the abyss.

At four he's learned to play the violin.

For his ninth birthday he asked (and got) a chemistry set.

At ten he begun deliberately flirting with the panic danger of it, and he took to picking up carcasses of birds and small animals from the garden and fields, taking them into the tool shed (he was banished from the kitchen on the very first try: "One day you'll have a kitchen of your own, young man, and you'll do whatever you want in it, but not in *my* kitchen"), and cutting them open.

He started smoking cigarettes at thirteen, hash at fifteen; by the time he was at uni he'd graduated to IV morphine and cocaine.

Then, the work. He'd hoped that his work would prove a durable, sustainable solution: he'd keep peering into the fascinating, devastatingly dead and deadly whirlpool of the second law of thermodynamics, while at the same time holding fast to consensual reality, maintaining a measure of social acceptability (Mummy had always been so keen that he did), and doing his level best to fucking stop the Bandersnatch of entropy. Or at least slow it down a bit.

Now he feels --no, he *knows*-- that the whirlpool has gobbled him whole.

It's shredding him to pieces.

It's shredding *John* to pieces.

Nobody around seems to care or listen, their attention on IV drips and the time for the next antibiotic shot and how high his leg must hang to help with circulation and bedsore prevention and other bloody trifles.

And Sherlock can't do a damn thing about it.

He's not even sure that the information they give him (*He's alive; He's survived surgery; He's in pharmacological coma*) is truthful and accurate, or tailored to fit his own condition instead (*Slight concussion; emotionally unstable; avoid added stress.*)

This is how it feels, he thinks, whenever he's lucid enough to think (which means roughly half an hour between the moment when the drugs' effect begins to wane and the moment when the pain grows to the point he can barely breathe). *Caring for someone. Losing them. I didn't know*, he thinks. *It never occurred to me. What wouldn't I give never to have known.*

As soon as they free his hands, he fetches his phone and calls Mycroft.

He's had to promise not to try and get out of bed again, so reaching for the lower cupboard drawer without setting foot on the floor requires the best part of an hour and some ingenious use of the oxygen tube, but in the end he gets it, and he begins to text as fast as his bandaged fingers allow (which is not much).

Mycroft is there within twenty minutes.

It's 2:15 in the night.

Mycroft looks at the utter grief in his brother's eyes, wan and lost as he only saw them when their father died (Mycroft was 13, Sherlock only 4; his little brother had touched his fingers to the pale, sharp nose and asked in a small voice *Why is he so cold?*) and leaves without a word. Eight minutes later, he's back with John's medical. He presses it to Sherlock's hands and forms a number on his own phone.

At 2:31 Sherlock, his brother's phone pressed to his ear, is questioning the surgeon who operated on John, slightly trembling index finger sliding down the sheets of paper line by line. *It's early to tell for sure, but he should probably make it.*

No, he's not regained consciousness; yes, we're keeping him under on purpose; no, he's not on assisted respiration; yes, if all goes well he's very likely going to recover with minimal permanent damage; no, he can't receive visits yet because of the risk of infection; yes, we're giving him painkillers. Yes, yes, plenty of painkillers.

No, I'm not lying to you.

At 2:47 Sherlock falls back onto the pillows and closes his eyes.

"Thank you," he whispers.

"You're welcome," Mycroft answers, picking his phone from Sherlock's now limp hand. "A two-bed private room will be arranged as soon as medically possible. Try to be patient."

Sherlock is discharged three weeks later. He becomes the bane of cabbies in NW London, with his twice-daily visits to the Royal London Hospital despite the ungodly length of plaster cast they have to help him fit into the backseat.

John is discharged five weeks and two days after Sherlock.

"Was it as bad as the other time?" Sherlock asks him.

"Much better drugs. No enteric fever. You to keep me company. Not so bad. No," John smiles.

Sherlock still concentrates completely on doing his work on a crime scene. But now he sometimes offers a quick handshake to the victim's mother, husband, or daughter. To the victim's friend or lover.

He doesn't say anything, but they know.

And Sherlock knows.

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Notes:

1. "Jehova in the Book of Job": *Job*, 42, 12-15; quoted from the New International Version at <http://www.biblegateway.com>.

2. "A morally neutral casualty of unimaginable violence": the universe as defined by the philosopher on TV, in *September* directed by Woody Allen (1987). I already used the quote in a story in another fandom; it's so accurate that I also needed it here.

3. The title and text bears reference to this passage:

"Would you -- be good enough -- "Alice panted out after running a little further, "to stop a minute -- just to get -- one's breath again?"

"I'm good enough," the King said, "only I'm not strong enough. You see, a minute goes by so fearfully quick. You might as well try to stop a *Bandersnatch*."

LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking Glass*, ch. VII (1872).

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