

The changing shape of clouds

by mazaher

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To fennish, who asked all the right questions to make this a lot better.

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It's a cool clear day in London. Temperature 12°C, humidity 83%, light breeze from the north, a scattering of *cumulus fractus*.

Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, lets himself fall from the roof on the west side of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, West Smithfield, London, EC1A 7BE.

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The low sky of London doesn't want him.
It spits him out like the bone of a cherry.

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The stunt is dangerous: could be lethal.
It is planned carefully by the two sharpest minds in the United Kingdom.
It is done in a handful of half-seconds, determination sharp like a rapier.
Sherlock survives.

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What saves him, after, is a move of *baritsu*.
He has a list, given to him by Mycroft: seventy-four contacts from Jim Moriarty's mobile phone.
He sends the message from a covered number.

*Rich Brook is dead.
Sherlock Holmes
is dead. Long live
ME. Yours truly,
Jim. PS: UOM*

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For 95 hours, it works.
He gives instructions to Moriarty's contacts, manoeuvres them into an array of traps, sends alerts to the police in twenty-three countries.
He must have them all caught at the same time, before any of them realise something's amiss.
It must work, or he's dead.

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As it turns out, at the 96th hour one Col. Sebastian Moran is sprawled in a rattan chair in a bungalow in Ko Samui. He's going to cross over to the mainland in the night, hunting for tigers

and maybe wild boars in Namtok Si Khit National Park. Meanwhile, he cleans his Gen III thin film vision intensifier airgun and waits for the usual weekly control call by his boss. The call doesn't come on time. He waits the prescribed thirteen minutes. Then he puts the gun back in its case and starts making plans.

Two days later, in London, a homeless man is found unconscious under the south ramp of Southwark Bridge.

He's thirty-something, ginger, bearded, wearing a light blue shirt of Oxford cloth which has seen better days, and faded black jeans made in China. His long feet are bare and dirty. He carries no identification. In his left hip pocket is a cheap mobile phone, not password-protected.

He's been shot in the chest by an airgun.

His name is Sherlock Holmes.

The person who finds him is a woman about his age.

She wears her dark hair in a French braid. She wears a light checkered blazer over an oversized black shirt. She wears tan trousers and low-heeled brown shoes.

She recognised Col. Moran playing three-card poker at The Colony Casino in Hertford Street the night before.

She followed him. Lost him. Deduced her way here, two minutes too late.

Her name is Irene Adler.

She cleans the worst of the blood with the wipes in her handbag.

She fits her shirt over his, buttoning it carefully all the way.

She buttons down her blazer, covering her bare breasts.

She stops a cab. She cajoles the driver into helping stuff her *drunken friend* into the car. They stagger up the steps to her front door, an unassuming building on an unassuming street in East Acton.

She can't push or pull him up the stairs alone, so she sets him on a mattress in the laundry room and calls the number filed under "Esau" on his mobile.

The hardest part is negotiating an agreement with Mycroft in the four minutes nine seconds it takes for him to organise and send out a pick-up for Sherlock.

Mycroft sets for him to be taken to a safe house with medical assistance, she for sharing his confinement.

They don't tell John. If Sherlock shouldn't survive, neither would he.

They both expect it to last a few weeks.

Less if Sherlock will die.

It takes three years minus two weeks.

Four days later, at 11:52pm, Col. Moran leaves The Colony Club and hails a cab in Park Lane. He climbs in to find a very tall, very elegantly dressed man who shoots him twice in his right temple.

The man calmly walks away. The cab revs up and disappears.

The body is never found.

Internal loss of blood. Diffuse cerebral hypoxia. Coma. Brain damage.
Mycroft comes every day at 4 am. He traces his finger along Sherlock's palm, from wrist to fingertips.
He sighs, and leaves.
After 52 days Sherlock wakes up.

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The rest of the three years he spends in rehab.
He is learning from scratch how to breathe, eat, move his limbs, control his bowels, and walk.
He is learning from scratch how to think.
His first intelligible words are for Mycroft.
"Couldn't sleep, brother?" he mutters.
Mycroft reaches to touch Sherlock's hand in the way he did when he was unconscious.
He stops.
He smiles a small smile, and walks out.

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Midway through the first year Sherlock recognises the nurse they call Irene.

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From then on, his progress is surprising.
Once he is found deducing the cook's middle daughter having whooping-cough from how his lamb cutlet is unevenly done on the two sides, he is proclaimed ready for dismissal.
He doesn't want to go.
"I need to improve muscular fitness," he says, "and recover my sock index."
He works himself to exhaustion, so he doesn't have time to be bored.

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They don't tell John. Neither knows how to face him. Both have saved a man's life and can't save another from his grief. Each wonders, *Does this make me a coward?*

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Four months later, Sherlock steps outside in the fresh light of morning.
He is ready.

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West Norwood.
A residential neighbourhood of well-maintained houses for families and young professionals.
The terraced house of red brick is on Chestnut Road.
The door is vivid blue.
He rings the bell.
"Hello, John."

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John's faint takes Sherlock by surprise. He grabs him by the shoulders, can't prevent him toppling over but he manages to protect John's head from colliding with the doorjamb. He bumps his knuckles instead.
They fall together, crumpling in the hallway.
The double thud brings a woman rushing from the inside of the house to find them in a tangle of limbs on the floor.

"I'm getting married," John says.
"I see," Sherlock answers. "Congratulations."
"I really thought you died."
"I really did, for a while."
"It's good to have you back."
John smiles, new creases raying out at the corners of his eyes.
"...Yes," Sherlock exhales.

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Mary is slim, bright, and kind, but in her eyes a spear-tip glints.
There is no doubt at all that she has John's back, like he has hers, completely and competently.
This is no kid romance.
They're both adults, a lot of life already lived.
Their whole inner landscape was irrevocably altered when both chose to make the other the main view from the window.
The change is major. Sherlock is awed.
He hadn't thought of this.
There is a John-shaped hole now in his image of what his return would be. He watches it, edges shimmering like burned steel. He watches John's eyes on Mary, half-squeezing in bliss.
My loss, he reasons, is irrelevant. John gains. I'm still winning.

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"I'm afraid it will be different from before," says Mary. "But I don't want him to miss you."
"I'm not going to push myself between you," he answers slowly. "One can't live the life of another. Believe me, for I tried."

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"You know I loved you, yes? ...I love you still. I'm glad to have you here."
"*No greater love than giving one's life for one's friends.* Idiots. Being willing to watch one's friend die, that's greater. You did that for me--"
"Yes, I did, didn't I? You bastard." But John is smiling.
"--I can't ask more."

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It's a bright, chilly day over London. Temperature 2°C, humidity 40%, gusts of a stiff breeze from the east-north-east, sky streaked with *cirrus uncinus*.
Sherlock thinks of the man who watched him jump.
He thinks of the two people who watched, waiting for him to live or die.
A friend, a brother, a woman.
Three people love him.
Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, curls his lips in a small smile.
He's making progress.

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