

The empty time

by mazaher

January, 2012

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A series of vignettes about the hiatus years, between The Reichenbach Fall (aka The Final Problem in canon) and what will be the new rendition of canon's The Empty House. I ended up doing a lot of work on this story, nearly as much as I did on the series Two lives, two deaths in the ST-TOS fandom. That is also a collection of bits and pieces, connected by a grief.

Perhaps this happens because one known effect of grief is to shatter life into a myriad of splinters. Looking on at the rest of one's life as a whole becomes unthinkable, and the most one can do is dealing with one fragment after another.

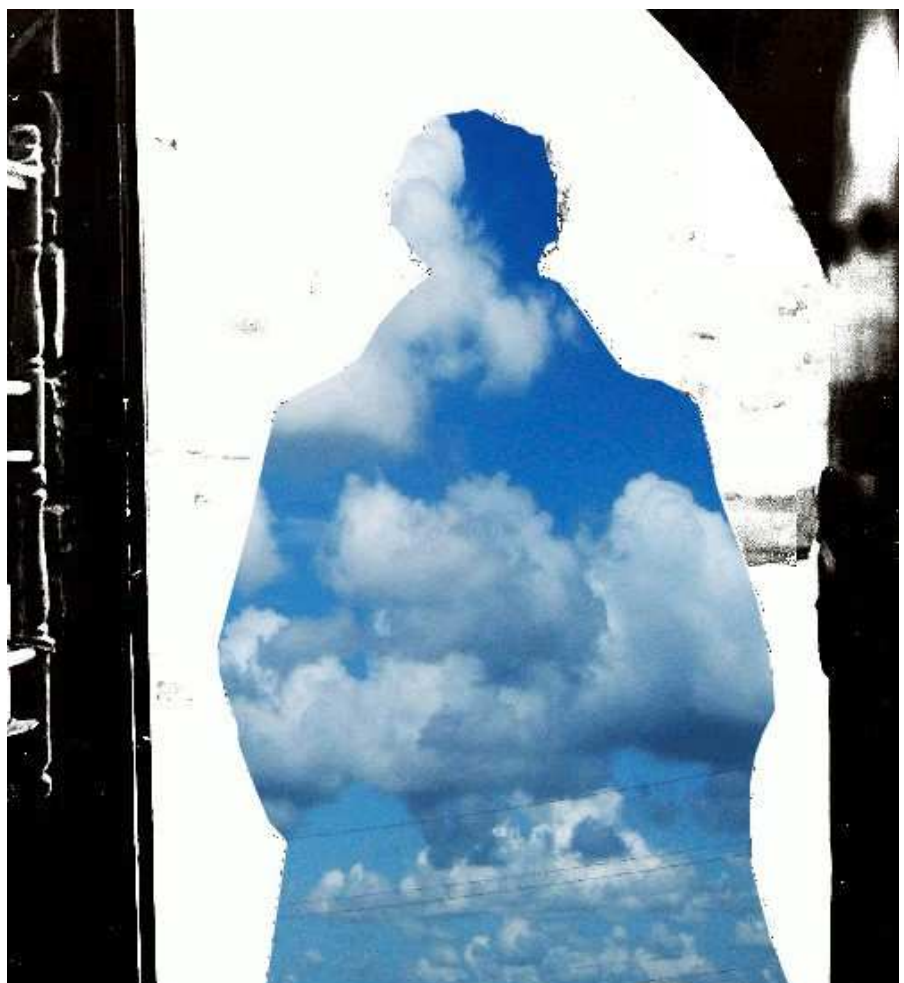
So this is probably another case in which the medium is the message.

The image here below is mine, my very first elaboration with layers in Gimp. One day, if I am very very lucky, I may learn how to do moving .gifs.

The other images are screencaps from The Great Game and The Reichenbach Fall.

See endnotes for more details.

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Pleasures do pass and sunrises end and stars do fade away
But it's love and it's virtue and honor and truth that remain for all days (...)

-- KAREEM SALAAMA, *Get busy living*
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu9FnXo7iJM>)

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Day one

John

When he got home that evening, he didn't get so far as climbing the stairs.
Mrs. Hudson was sitting in the dark on the lowest step, a crumpled paper tissue in her hand.
She had cried all her tears alone. Now her eyes were dry and raw and she was chilled.
John led her to her sitting room, sat her on her chair, wrapped her in a warm throw, made tea.
It was good, having something to do.
"Would you like me to stay?" he asked at the end.
"Would you? Please, dear."
They fell asleep as they were, sitting askew in the parlour chairs. Neither admitted that it was
as much for John's comfort as Martha's own.
The crick in his neck and her aching hip the next morning went mostly unnoticed because of
the broken hearts.

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Sherlock

That first night, he slept at Wiggin's.
Or rather, he didn't sleep at all, the excitement of jumping from four storeys and the piercing
grief of loss (so many losses) battling in his mind and tearing it to pieces.
Being dead, he found, was very different from what he'd thought.

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Wiggins

He didn't sleep a wink. Kept me awake as well, tossing and turning. Bit of crying, too, I
believe. I didn't mind-- he's so in love, and he'd had to do such a cruel thing.
We who know him don't believe the papers, of course. But who would ever listen to one of us?
He stumbled away early in the morning, cold and hungry and aching all over. Poor sod, he's
not used to sleeping rough. Anyway, he's a fast learner-- Mayfair he may be, but not a soft
one. No sir.
He'll be as right as rain in no time, and once he gets on the move, God help his enemies.

::

Week one

John

Ella is trying to be helpful in all the ways she's been trained to do.

"There's stuff that you wanted to say... but didn't say it."

"Yeah."

John knows by now that proper therapy begins with stating the obvious. He's here of his own free will, so he makes an effort to answer. After all, he's speaking to a colleague --of sorts.

"Say it now."

John considers.

"No." A small shake of the head. "Sorry, can't."

Ella doesn't ask him why. She knows Dr. John H. Watson for a strong man, a man who has seen worse than she ever did, and from whom she can learn much-- in fact, she has.

She has learned that her questions help him find a way of his own around his pain, and it doesn't really matter that he tell her which.

John in his turn knows very well why he can't say to Ella the things he didn't say to Sherlock. Saying those things to Ella --clever, helpful Ella-- would mean saying them to feel better himself.

John doesn't want to feel better.

John is a warrior, but neither at the pool nor on St. Bart's roof did Sherlock allow him to fight at his side against Moriarty.

John is a healer, but there is nothing of Sherlock --nothing in that smashed body pouring dark blood on a dirty pavement-- that he could heal.

John feels a failure right now, deserving to feel as bad as it gets.

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Martha

The silence.

John is quiet as a mouse these days.

I try leaving the telly on, but I find myself straining to hear behind the stupid chatter the usual sounds from upstairs, and there are none. Not anymore.

So I turn the telly off, close my eyes and listen inside my head for all the noises, all the voices. Disappeared.

I remember the relief of knowing that I wouldn't have to listen to my husband again. Silence felt good then.

Now I miss Sherlock so much.

I miss them both so much.

::

Mummy

He's gone.

Fifty-five feet, less than six seconds at g, and he's gone.

How am I ever expected to stand it?

To keep breathing, eating, sleeping, expressing myself in human words and well-rounded phrases, when he's gone?

Gone.

No, who am I fooling with euphemisms?

Dead. Smashed on the pavement in front of a hospital, after he tipped himself off the roof.

A flame has been extinguished, and the sun is darkened.

My son, so bright, like a blue flame.

So brave and reckless.

So kind, and ashamed to be.

Just growing into himself, finding his way, since he was not alone anymore.

I will never know for sure what happened, what made him do it.

I know there must have been no other way.

The lies, I don't believe.

As little as I ever knew him --and it is hard for a mother to know her son-- I know that there wasn't a false bone in his body.

His talent was truth.

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Lestrade

Almost every evening, after dark, he walks all the way to the Golden Keys, three blocks down from the bedsit he's rented after filing for divorce. He'll have to find something better soon, if he wants to have the kids for weekends. But for now, it's enough. It's drab enough to suit him.

Since he's been suspended, he doesn't drink at The Feathers anymore. He doesn't fancy the chance of meeting Donovan, or Anderson, or his former boss, or anyone else from the Yard.

Since he's left home, he's made a point of also avoiding the Book and Bell down the road: the landlady, Mabel, is a friend of his wife's, and he doesn't like the idea that his stout be drawn by somebody who probably knows the colour of every feather making him a cuckold.

Sometimes he makes himself go up to Baker Street and try to pull John out for a couple of pints at The Volunteer, but most nights he simply hasn't the guts.

The Golden Keys is perfect.

Small pub, decent lager, not too near what he still can't bring himself to call it home.

Not too far either. Just the right distance, so he isn't tempted to drink and drive.

When he stepped in the first night, he didn't delude himself that he would go unrecognised: his face had been on enough papers those last few weeks. But thank God this is a quiet little pub in anonymous suburbia, and nobody ever as much as mentioned the whole mess.

Only once, the second night, when the pub was almost empty and Greg was three-quarters down his second pint, his mood getting lower in proportion to the level of the lager in the glass...

"Of course we don't believe all those lies, my wife and I," the landlord had said. "He found my daughter's cat who'd been trapped into a car booth two blocks down the road. It's impossible to arrange a trick for something like that. What is it that he used to say...? *When you eliminate the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.* Here, the next's on the house."

Bob doesn't discuss Sherlock aloud, and he makes sure to send Greg home before he's had more than just enough.

Lestrade appreciates that.

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Week two

John

He asked Molly for pictures of the postmortem.

She said she wasn't allowed, and mumbled something about Mycroft.

John didn't insist.

Sherlock had a mole on the side of his neck, just right of his Adam's apple, and another, slightly larger, on the inside of his left thigh, like a drop of coffee on the thin silky milk-white skin midway between his knee and his groin.

The moles are something John can stand to remember. Barely.

What nearly breaks him is imagining the small scratchy noise of the scalpel as it cut through the sparse hair on the chest and along the belly.

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Month one

John



John is sitting in his chair at 221B.

He is barefoot. These days, he often feels like he is floating a couple of inches above the floor: he knows he needs to ground himself, but fails, his feet curling up and off the ground and bunching on to one another like a baby's as soon as he sits.

If having one's feet on the ground is a metaphor for facing reality as it is, then a part of John is trying its damn best not to.

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Harry

I must pull him out of there. It's stifling him, and he doesn't even realise.

I can't bring him here; we'd be at each other's throat within two days. And I don't want him to feel he's taking a step behind, falling back on family dynamics that clearly never worked for him.

I understand that he needs space, but what he needs is a space of his own.

Not his dead flatmate's.

He needs a place with no human kidneys in the fridge, no skull on the mantelpiece, and an absolute lack of ghosts.

Maybe then he will remember who he is.

::

Lestrade

While both his divorce and the internal inquest proceed, Lestrade tries to keep himself busy during the day.

He sets the alarm for six, and he's out by seven.

He makes a point of leaving the crime pages unread in the paper he browses at lunch; he's discovered early on that keeping watch from the outside on the workings of NSY isn't conducive to good digestion.

He takes long walks and he doesn't miss much in his surroundings: it's enough to keep himself in shape, his middle-aged body as well as his policeman's mind.

He ran down a purse snatcher once. A very young officer finally arrived to arrest her, followed closely by the breathless, weeping victim all eager to identify the thief. The officer didn't recognize him. Greg walked away unnoticed.

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John

The flat is silent and empty.

Bits and pieces of memories, living on in the corners, come out whenever he's alone, and rub on his ankles like starving stray cats.

These days, he's always alone.

He could stare them down, the memories. He could make them slink back in their corners, ears flattened, tails twitching, whiskers quivering. Famished.

But the memories are the only thing he's left with, aren't they, just as he's the only one they're left with-- the only one who can still remember all those things nobody else ever knew. No, John won't stare them away.

::

Molly

Molly is trying her hardest.

She bet her career and her life as she knew it on that crazy stunt, and it will be years before she'll know if she's won or lost.

But that was the easier part.

The hard part is now, trying not to read into this any more than there is.

Having watched Sherlock at work for a few years, she should have learned to be wary.

He's only turned to her in his hour of direst need, when accepting help from those others who would also have given it freely would have meant endangering them as much as himself.

Molly knows (she has known from the beginning) that her role in the plan is only marginally safer than the others' would have been; only two words away, instead of just one, from a bullet in her head.

She should feel used.

Instead, she jumped at the chance. Because hers is an empty life, and she lives every day in the company of the dead, and when her turn will come to be stretched on a slab of metal and prepared to be buried, she will want to have done something worthwhile.

This is it.

Because there never was a man like Sherlock, and she feels lucky just for the privilege of being allowed near him, and if he asks for her help again, at least she can do that.

Molly tries her hardest to remember that this is not (now less than ever) the beginning of the love story she'd dreamed of, at one time.

At best, it will be the shift from a casual acquaintance to a desultory friendship of sorts; one of those friendships in which one of the friends can't resolve to delete the other's address after

the fourth unanswered Christmas card, and the other will share a cab and thirty second's worth of words if they bump into each other while hailing it.

But it's fine with Molly.

She'll do it.

The trick is keeping her expectations low.

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John

The days seem neverending. Evenings feel like a comparative blessing, even if sleep remains haphazard. John lies in bed, closes his eyes, and waits. Sometimes it will be rambling dreams, sometimes rambling memories. He's not always sure which is which.

Sherlock didn't like being stared at -- despite his hunger for recognition, fame didn't fit him. He never handled it well. He allowed only a few people to really look and see him. There had to be some connection already standing for him to trust anybody near enough. The old, warm trust between him and Lestrade. The affection for Mrs. Hudson, the only person with whom Sherlock freely, openly initiated physical contact. The immediate ease John and he had both felt with each other.

It was too early for John to notice at the time, such a long time before the one shy look, the one tentative touch, which had broken their precarious balance of tension and finally tumbled them into a bed. But he remembers now that Sherlock asked him to be called by first name as soon as their second meeting. Sherlock never liked to call anyone or be called himself by first name; even Lestrade was never Greg to him, and Mycroft will rather call him *brother dear* than use his given name.

Against strangers, against black magic and the evil eye, Sherlock wore a disguise.

Few could pierce it.

Mycroft, of course, who wore a disguise of his own. Sherlock and Mycroft, like Sandokan and the White Rajah of Sarawak, or Conrad the Corsair and Seyd Pasha: the role-playing between them established and safe... or so it had seemed.

It turned out that it wasn't so safe, nor a play after all, and the thought of Mycroft's treason makes John slide dangerously toward pure hatred.

Moriarty. He and Sherlock, each wearing his own flamboyant battle outfit like medieval knights riding into battle, lances quivering, feathered helmets shining, visors clanging shut on their thirst for blood. Then the charge, the tilt, the clashing of armours.

Irene Adler, herself so opaque in her own invisible shield that at times, for a moment or two, Sherlock seemed to have no idea how to deal with her. How to repair the tiny holes her too keen eyes made in his persona.

It had not been her lack of clothes that empowered her on their first meeting; it was her lack of manners. Like Napoleon, she unilaterally changed the rules of engagement. Until then, Sherlock had been the only one to use subversion of decorum as a weapon. From then on, there would be another. The fascination was obvious, the competition inevitable. The prize not destruction; rather, an even more dangerous mutual admiration.

But when Sherlock had found himself under the scrutiny of thousands of eyes, he had crumbled.

He had asked John to watch him as he jumped, as though he needed that pair of eyes fixed on him to forget about all the others.

When he met Sherlock, John had nothing to lose.

He didn't know he'd be gifted with so much-- only to lose it all once again.

No, that's not true. He's lost Sherlock, but the gift remains. John has received a gift of life which can only be acknowledged by living.

So John doesn't think about the neat click of the catch on his gun, or the fresh watery scent of the breeze pulling at him on bridges, or the silent appeal of a handful of pills and a plastic bag. However much he hurts, killing himself would be the ultimate denial of the difference Sherlock made, just by being alive; it would be the ultimate treason.

John, the witness, lives on.

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Mycroft

The kitchen is almost completely dark, only the working top lights are turned on.

Mycroft Holmes is making himself *filet au poivre vert* as he sips *Côtes du Ventoux, Les Gélinothtes 2007*.

It has been a bad week.

He is used to be alone, and until now, nothing had ever marred his relief at the freedom loneliness affords him: the only freedom his life contemplates, really. Being the British Government means he's on the breach 24/7.

But the recent turn of events concerning his brother is proving harder to face than he had foreseen.

The averted eyes and turned backs at the Diogenes' Club.

The whispers --oh so hushed-- trailing after him at Buckingham Palace and even at 10 Downing Street.

The awkward silences of Anthea.

He'd never realised before how much the texture of his daily human interactions determines the way his life flows. The texture has changed. He is changed.

"Do you ever wonder if there's something wrong with us?" Sherlock had asked him, the very last time they had met as brothers.

He didn't believe at the time that what they were came under the definition of "wrong".

Now he's not so sure.

As the sauce thickens and the pungent scent of the green peppers and cognac wafts up from the skillet, he takes a tentative sip from his Burgundy glass.

Sherlock used to mock his preference for wider bowls. *Tasting your way around like a snake, the world on the tip of your tongue*, he said. *You should swallow it whole some time*.

In this dark empty kitchen in a dark empty house, the nearest living soul two storeys below, Mycroft admits to himself that his brother's absence is like an open wound.

His mind knows Sherlock is alive.

His heart misses him all the same.



::

Mummy

There is something Mycroft isn't telling me.
That is not by any means an uncommon occurrence: his life is shrouded in secrets by necessity, and I don't want my curiosity to make it harder for him than it already is.
He carries such a weight, alone and with that grace of his own.
But this time it's different. This time it's tearing him apart.
I want to help, and I don't know how.

::

Month six

John

John can't make himself a decent cup of tea anymore.
He couldn't even afford to drink it anyway: he has enough problems already falling asleep.
He's switched to decaf instant coffee, black and unsweetened, which he hates.
Like his life, he thinks.
He's moved out of 221B, all the way to Uxbridge: a two-room furnished flat with a tiny bathroom on Baker's Road.
The irony of the address wasn't lost on Harry.
The move took all of two hours. The few cardboard boxes with his belongings are still neatly stacked in the sitting room, unopened.
John's needs are few and simply met.
On Mondays and Thursdays he puts in a few hours at the West London Medical Centre.
On Tuesdays and Fridays, he takes the bus to St Mungo's in Battersea and volunteers at Health Action Zone.
On Saturdays, he takes tea with Martha Hudson.
On Wednesdays, he visits Sherlock's grave.

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an exchange of texts

-- How was it for you, being dead?
-- Easy enough: I was not in love at the time.
-- Does being in love change things so much?
-- It changes everything. Hungry?

::

Wiggins

I saw him in St. Mungo's, the day Thorn cut his wrist on the sharp edge of a tin can and I brought him there to get stitched.
He recognised me, of course. He nodded, then focused on Thorn completely.



He's good at his job. Quick, gentle, thorough. He always warns when it's going to hurt, and exactly how much. Many don't, the bastards. As though they think you should be punished for the lifestyle.

After he cleaned, anaesthetised, disinfected, and stitched, he gave Thorn an anti-tetanus serum shot, and his mobile phone number to the both of us.

"Just in case," he said, looking at me, voice even, face unreadable. Yet something around the eyes made me blink and turn away and take my leave as fast as courtesy allowed, before. Before I told him.

::

Donovan

Without Lestrade, nothing is the same anymore. We used to be a team, looking out for each other; now we're only a bunch of people, each minding their own business. More unsolved cases. More injuries on duty. More flak from the press.

I thought I knew him, after these five years or so. But I knew nothing. What I thought was him, was no more than the crinkly wrap around the package. The one who really got to know him was Watson, and it didn't take him five minutes. But now...

My God, what have I done?

Lestrade

Most of all, he finds he misses the silence.

Sherlock's sudden silence when at last he'd catch the pattern of something and his eyes would go wide on a hushed, awed "Oh."

Lestrade has seen Sherlock in all possible states. He's seen him high as an albatross, talking faster than anyone could follow as he plotted a map from a few scattered clues. He's seen him pale as a sheet and quivering from the effort as he walked in on a crime scene, only half-recovered from the worst of cocaine withdrawal. He's seen him at the top of his form, his mind purring smoothly like a perfect precision engine. He's seen him have tantrums; he's seen him hurt; he's seen him exultant. Often tired beyond exhaustion, and still going. Rarely, relaxed and content. One time, frightened.

But there is nothing former D.I. Gregory Lestrade remembers and misses as much as Sherlock's silences, when every piece in the puzzle of reality snapped into place and finally -- finally-- quit hanging and jangling around in the permanent storm raging in Sherlock's mind.

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Year one

John

After Afghanistan (especially after Afghanistan, and some of the things he saw there), John finds himself taking the parts of the underdog by instinct. His sense of justice demands that the plates be made even before discussing a controversial issue, whatever it may be.

Perhaps this is why...

Sherlock.

So vulnerable under his dazzling disguise.

And he knew. John knows he knew.

"Liberty in death, the only true freedom".

The quote had gone almost unnoticed at the time, in Henry's kitchen, the moor looming desolate and vast outside the glass doors.

John remembers it now, and shivers.

Sherlock's hands so delicate around the hot mug from which he took a small sip.

Sherlock's voice so soft as he said the words as though talking to himself.

John has gone through a war, but nobody he ever met held the awareness of his own death so close, so vivid as Sherlock. It was for him the measure of every act, every thought, every choice.

John understands now. Like a samurai, Sherlock had always known he belonged to death.

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Lestrade

"You should go home now, mate."

"One more and I'll be going."

"Only if you promise you aren't driving."

"I'm not."

"One year today, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"To friends."

"To friends."

Bob clinks his glass to Greg's.

::

Sherlock

It is curious how some bits and pieces of information refuse to be deleted.

*Death is here and Death is there,
Death is busy everywhere,
All around, within, beneath, above is Death
And we are Death...*

Shelley, wasn't it?

Quite right, he was.

I look around, and the world is crowded with the dead.

Since I died, I am looking at them with different eyes. I have been a corpse myself. I will be one again at some point in the future. Very soon, if I'm not careful. Perhaps even if I am.

It gives one a completely new perspective on roadkill.

::

Year two

John

John has been working lately on a rationalisation of sorts, re: grief.

He's not going to see Ella anymore: he's resigned to the fact that "facing his grief" doesn't make it hurt one bit the less, and they both agreed that therapy by then was moving in circles.

One of the things John knows for sure at this point is that the going is bound to be harder when the death or the loss presents one or more of the following characters, in growing order of incidence:

1. When it is untimely. Sherlock has died young, heartbreakingly so. All that life, vibrant and full... and one moment later there was nothing left. Dead bodies look so empty.

2. When it is painful, which this death obviously was. John hopes that the shock may have dulled the anguish and the pain, but as a doctor as well as a soldier, he knows that death is rarely instantaneous. Before and after loss of consciousness, death is a process. Organs shutting down in succession, decomposition beginning in the guts and extending throughout the body, muscles seizing as lactic acid accumulates, blood clotting-- John tries not to think about the blood.

3. When it is the result of injustice done to the deceased. John knows in his bones how faithful Sherlock was to the core of himself, following his own path in honesty and truth through thick and thin with rare integrity, until the end. Sherlock's path was different from that of the hoi polloi. They benefited from it; but difference is something the hoi polloi rarely tolerate, and Sherlock was pushed back, step by step, until he was cornered on such a narrow edge that the only way to go further was by treading on thin air. Until they took possession of his life to the point that the only way to recover himself from their grabbing hands was to step off a roof.

4. When the grieving survivor feels guilt for not having effectively protected the deceased. John was sure he could and would protect Sherlock. But Sherlock is dead. It is ultimately irrelevant that Sherlock himself actively kept John away from the final confrontation. "Alone protects me" vs. "Friends protect people": as usual, Sherlock did things in his own way, and, as it turned out, this time he was wrong.

John regrets nothing, but the price for the blessing of having shared part of his life with Sherlock is no less appalling because it was Sherlock who paid it.

John only watched.

Sherlock's death was a paradox of visibility. It bounced from paper to paper and to the newscasts within a few hours; yet, like the last Beatles' concert on the roof in Abbey Road, very few were there to watch. Very few can bear witness. It has even now lapsed into oblivion, one more dusty myth: one more famous nobody crushed by a mistake, or an overdose, or a thoughtless act of hubris, or merely by luck running out.

Two years are barely enough to resume breathing under this crushing weight that never lifts. But strong people can and do function even in the depths of grief.

John is a soldier.

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Sherlock

He's been sleeping under a sheet of corrugated iron on a street in Hanoi, in a drab motel room in Oracle, Arizona, and in a suite at the Danieli in Venice, while a snowstorm raged outside on the frozen lagoon.

He's learned a whole new meaning of survivor's guilt.

He's felt like he's the only one left alive, the details of what happened still sharp as knives in his brain.

He's never been one to sleep much, but now rest has become even more elusive for him.

How can he rest without John?

No, the problem is not that.

The problem is, how can he rest while John doesn't, because John is going through hell.

Sherlock hadn't imagined it would be so hard.

He's surprised at how he misses John's warm body, the contact: not so much the quick casual touches, not the sex either, but the long, leisurely hugs. The spooning. (He's taken to sleeping with his back pressed to a pillow, to the tester of the bed, to the cushions of a sofa... and imagine it is John there, holding his back).

He thought he didn't care, not so much.

He thought he was different. Like Mycroft. But by now even Mycroft is beginning to crack, and Sherlock feels utterly broken.

Sherlock was used to behaving badly around John. There were times when he'd like to stop himself, but couldn't, or wouldn't-- like that time in the lab in Devon. But this is different.

Now he knows he's been hurting John more than anybody or anything else could ever do, and he can't see his face, can't see whether things are still, by a hair's breadth, within safety limits, or if (when) John has had enough.

All the while, there is work to do.

It's never been so difficult, never so absorbing. Or so dangerous.

He must be as fast as death; faster, if he wants to survive himself.

There had been a time, before John, when he used to wank hard and fast, trying to get it over quickly, like throwing a bone to a dog so that it stops barking. Since John... since John, he could almost imagine he was loved, after. Now he can only remember, because how can he believe he may ever be forgiven?

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Year three

Sherlock and John

And then...

And then it is a bit of an anticlimax on a Tuesday evening, when it has just stopped raining and Sherlock finds himself on the doorstep of John's new flat in Bakery's Road, Uxbridge --of all places.

Where John lives alone because he could never have a new flatmate, not now, not ever.

It is an anticlimax when Sherlock doesn't pick the lock but just rings the bell (how dull) and then pushes the door open when John buzzes him in without asking who's there (he should, so many criminals around, you never know...)

Sherlock's been strung out for so long on adrenaline and grief. Amphetamines whenever he managed to lay his hands on some. Even now he's riding the tail of this morning's high, and he stumbles, almost falling as he makes his way up the stairs.

John steps out on the landing. He looks at the tall thin man with the worn soiled clothes, the three-days stubble, the badly shorn head, eyes shifting anxiously around before finding his and fixing there. The irises are pale as steel.

"Sherlock," John says evenly.

"I shot the last one two hours ago."

"Shut up and come on in."

He pulls him inside, locks the door.

"You shot the last... what?"

"Last killer. Moriarty's all dead now. And I just... wanted to come down. Touch ground. Come home."

"Home? Here?"

"Home is you. Ground is you. May I touch you? Touch me."

John takes Sherlock's hand to feel his pulse, and his own hands shake, the fingers remembering when he knelt on a dirty pavement, blood pooling on the cold stone, and he couldn't find the beat in that limp chilly wrist...

Sherlock hisses.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nothing. I bumped my hand on the steps."

"Let me see to it."

"Tomorrow. I think I need to sleep now ...please?"

"Just let me bandage it with some Ibugel."

By the time John is back from the bathroom, Sherlock is fast asleep, curled up on himself on the sofa, facing the back, muddy shoes abandoned on the floor. John strips the duvet from the bed, wraps it around the too-thin back, the long stork legs, the big feet with the long toes he suddenly realises he missed; then he takes his pillow, a blanket, throws them on the rug beside the sofa, and rolls himself into a cocoon of contentment.

John hasn't decided yet whether he'd rather kiss Sherlock or punch him --he guesses he'll have probably made up his mind by breakfast time tomorrow-- but there's no way in hell he's sleeping anywhere except next to him, this first night after three years.

He pushes his right hand under the duvet, in the low slit arching between Sherlock's waist and the seat cushions, and falls asleep listening to the beat of their two hearts.

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Mycroft

I had forgotten how it felt.

Peace.

He's back, safe and more or less sound, his plan accomplished, the last nail hammered on Moriarty's coffin.

I must invite him here some evening, him and John, of course. We'll have some of this Ron Matusalem Extra Viejo, botellado en 1976-- hecho en Cuba, not that dull stuff made in Florida, and we'll bicker comfortably for an hour or so. Time to catch up with my favourite pirate.

I take a sip, roll it on my tongue. When this was bottled, Sherlock was one month old. Clear, fiery, kicking like a mule. The liquor as well as the baby. Just right for a celebration.

I always had my reserves about many of the parables in the Gospels. What if the lost sheep found the way home all by himself and trotted in, black curls messed up and damp with rain, after the shepherd had given up on him as too wild to tame?

And what if the younger sibling, after squandering his father's money on drugs and chemical equipment, had invented for himself a job as a consulting detective, found someone to work with, met someone to love, and never turned back?

I often pass for the spiteful older brother. The role suits me, and Sherlock plays antagonist with relish. But truly, truly I say to you that I would be the first to go and slaughter the fattened calf.

Because Sherlock is my brother, and there is no-one else in the world like him.

I don't care a damn for the eyes that now strive to meet mine and for the respectful nods at the Diogenes Club. I care even less for the recantations in the media.

Invidiam Fortuna domat, was engraved in the printer's mark on the frontispice of a folio volume in Father's library, Lyons 1649, by the brothers Rigaud. The stolid face of a pale Sun peered among the clouds on the left. Is it chance or destiny that will subdue envy? I don't care which. Now all is well again.

What I do care about is that for three years I had forgotten how to breathe, and now I can breathe again. So *celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.*

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endnotes:

- Ella and John's dialogue is taken from *The Reichenbach Fall*, 1:24:23 to 1:24:45.
- The Feathers, on Broadway, is the nearest pub to New Scotland Yard (<http://www.travelswithbeer.com/2010/12/19/the-feathers-london/>). The Volunteer, on Baker Street, is the nearest to 221B (<http://www.thevolunteernw1.co.uk/>). The Book and Bell and the Golden Keys are fantasy.
- The mole on the neck is Cumberbatch's; the one on the thigh is fantasy (as far as I know).
- My first reaction to Irene when I first watched *A Scandal in Belgravia* was relief; I had feared much worse from the promo pictures. All the same, I'm not completely satisfied with how the script treats her. I'm not finding it easy to understand how she works either, nor Sherlock's attitude in her regard. John's thoughts are the result of my watching their body language during their interactions; they also seem to be supported by some observations voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch (when Irene sits on his lap, "Sherlock has no idea what to do") and Steven Moffat (when Irene wishes she can have him "right here on this desk", Sherlock "just shuts down for a moment") in the commentary to the episode. See the partial transcript by arianedevere at <http://arianedevere.livejournal.com/34145.html>, which however I read after writing this part of the story.
- John's observation about the void left when a life is extinguished is inspired by a piece of dialogue between François and Mopani in sir Laurens van der Post's *A story like the wind*, London: Hogarth's Press, 1972.
- About Heath Action Zone, see http://www.mungos.org/about/history/more_our_history. This part comes straight from a discussion with Lynn.
- Consultation about home treatment of contusions in the UK courtesy of irisbleufic.
- The parable of the lost sheep: Matthew, 18:12-13; the parable of the prodigal son: Luke, 15:32 (*New international version* at <http://www.biblegateway.com>).
- The engraving Mycroft mentions is this:

