

His best

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1. 1983: Conflict management

"Mother, you may want to check on Sherlock. He's baking a cake."

"I know, Mycroft. He said he wants to offer it to Celia."

"He *hates* Celia. And he's mixing in handfuls of crushed apple seeds and an anomalous dose of bitter almonds."

"Oh, my. Again. I guess I'll better have a look."

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"How is it coming, dear?"

"Quite perfect, Mother, if I say so myself. ...No, don't!"

He grabs his mother's hand as she leans to push a finger into the dough.

"Why? It looks so good."

"You know..." Sherlock lowers his voice to a whisper. "It's poisoned."

"But didn't you tell me you're making it for your friend Celia?"

"Yes and no."

Violet Holmes was not born yesterday, and in the almost seven years since giving birth to her younger son, she has learned to be very careful with words. With both his sons' as well as her own.

"Yes' what, and 'No' what else?"

"Yes, I'm going to give it to Celia, and no, it's not for her. It's against her. She's not my friend. She says I'm a swot, always swotting away, and she makes fun of me, even if she knows I am much faster with homework than she is. So I'm going to poison her and she'll die."

"Hmmm... You know, I'm having a problem here. Maybe you can help me solve it."

"Sure. What problem?"

Sherlock carefully smooths the dark, soft dough in the pan one last time and turns to his mother expectantly, wooden spoon still in hand. He likes solving problems, especially for his Mummy.

"What do you think I should do with you next time you call Mycroft an idiot? You know very well he is not. Should I poison you? It would seem logical. However, I don't *want* to poison you, because I love you, and I know from trustworthy sources that the same applies to Mycroft."

"But I am I and Celia is not."

"You surely are an unusual human being. Both you and your brother are. But are you quite sure the difference is relevant to the issue? Think. Each human being is a bit different. This is what makes us all equal, and equally valuable. Even when they --us-- behave badly or in a stupid way. Like..."

"Like numbers...? Irrational numbers?"

"Quite like that. Would you erase π from existence, only because you can't calculate all decimals? Killing people is wrong in the same way."

Sherlock frowns, then sighs.

"Then I'll have to throw away my cake, even if it's so nicely done."

"I'm afraid so. But you can bake it anyway and take a picture of it first, if you want."

"Mother..."

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm not at all sure that I will not call Mycroft an idiot at any time in the future. Words come so fast sometimes, they slip out of me before I can stop them."

"You'll do your best. Do it every time, and it will be enough. But it's important that you make sure not to poison anyone."

"Oh, that's easier. Making a cake takes a lot of time, I can stop before I finish."

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2. 2006: Motivation analysis

As usual, Lestrade is the last to leave the crime scene after the others have packed up. He's almost out of the door when he turns to see if Sherlock's coming. Maybe he'll accept an invitation to a drink-- just a couple of pints to wash down the sour taste of this particularly nasty double murder. Two children (one of them, a baby of ten months) fed sleeping pills in their dinner and then knifed to death by their mother after her husband left her for another woman-- and her money.

Sherlock is standing there, a still black silhouette in the darkened room, staring at the table bearing the remains of the meal.

Lestrade silently walks back to him, sets a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"I know how it all happened," Sherlock murmurs, "but I don't know why. Why should she want to kill her own sons? Couples fight to keep their children when they separate. Having born vital offspring, especially male, is widely considered as a honour for human females. In the circumstances, she should have felt even more attached to them. Why did she hate them?"

"She hated her unfaithful husband enough that she wanted to hurt him by killing his sons. She hated her sons because they carried half of their father's genes. And she hated herself for being unworthy of her husband's love, to the point that she wanted to punish herself by killing what she held most dear. It's not the first time, you know, since that ancient Greek witch onwards."

"Medea. But she wasn't Greek herself."

"Yes, Medea, and 2500 years of criminal statistics after her. Greek and otherwise."

"I believe..." and Sherlock stops.

Lestrade only gives a tiny squeeze on his thin shoulder.

"I believe that I will never make it. I just can't understand. What am I doing here, exactly? I mean, apart from representing an unwarranted and completely disproportionate allocation of resources. You'd get by quite well without me, and the world at large would be much better off."

Sherlock drops his chin and presses his lips shut. Lestrade sighs, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck. When he speaks, his voice is low.

"You are here because no, we wouldn't get by at all without you. You understand what we can't, when we can't. Motivation analysis is not your forte. Someone else can do it. You don't *have* to be everything. To be perfect. You do your best, and you see, it's more than enough most of the times..."

"Truth is, we need you. *I* need you, Sherlock. And I have a hunch that the world needs you, too. Care for a pint?"

Sherlock's eyes are a shade too bright, but then he blinks, and turns, slipping out from under Lestrade's hand.

"Fine. I'll buy, but I get to choose the place."

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3. 2010: Empathy training

The man sitting in the waiting area at the Yard is mumbling to himself, his face flushed red. Next to him on the bench, a girl of maybe five is crying quietly as Sally Donovan, one arm across her slender shoulders, helps her blow her nose.

In the next room, Sherlock is holding a cold compress to his black eye.

John looks on, arms crossed, an unhappy little frown line between his eyebrows.

"I was only asking her for facts. Why should she be upset?" Sherlock grumbles.

"She's learned through your courtesy that the man she let in the house, allegedly to cure her sick hamster, killed her mother instead. I bet she's upset. She's ashamed of herself, Sherlock! Dead mother. Dead hamster. Furious father socking inquisitive, frightening stranger. All her own fault."

"But I need the facts to catch the murderer."

"Can't you see..."

"*No I can't!* I'm trying my best here, John!"

"Right. Fine. You're trying your best. That just happens not to be good enough to..."

"Yes, yes, I know: 'Good, better, best, and never let it rest until your good is better and your better is best.' A bit of an unwinnable situation, don't you think? Whether or not there actually is a higher power of sorts to keep account, as St. Jerome seemed to believe. And whether or not he ever even *said* that, as nobody among the self-righteous quoters seems to be familiar with the precise locum."

There is a thin line of desperation in Sherlock's voice. John draws a breath, uncrosses his arms.

"Quite. Yes. You're right, of course. I'm sorry. I'm going on and on about empathy, when right now it's you who look like you've forgotten how to breathe."

John rubs his hand lightly on his shoulder. Sherlock pulls himself away.

"Don't *touch* me! ...Please. I need to think."

"No, listen to me. You need to touch. Be touched. Now. Here."

John offers his hand. Sherlock looks up at him for a moment, then takes it and squeezes a little. John squeezes back, then releases him.

"Thank you. Better?"

"A bit."

"What else do you need to know?"

"If the man wore a dark blue overall with a yellow badge."

"I'll go and ask her."

"Good. John...?"

"What?"

"Our best together is better than mine alone."

John smiles.

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