

## Shanghai, straightaway

by mazaher

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*London, Friday*

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When the message comes, John is in Mrs. Hudson's kitchen, gulping down the last sip of their Friday afternoon tea with muffins and melted butter. With the practice he's made this last couple of years, he's almost mastered the fine art of not dripping butter on his cuffs.

He picks the phone out of his pocket and his heart takes a somersault.

\*That\* number.

He blanches.

The message reads:

*31°12'N 121°30'E*

*Nan Jing West*

*Starbuck's Coffee*

*Wed, 10 am CST*

*if convenient.*

*If not, wouldn't you come anyway?*

"What is it, dear?"

John doesn't trust himself to speak right now.

He slips the phone to Martha, rubs a hand across his eyes and tries to remember how to breathe.

"Oh," she whispers. "It's... He's...". Then her face crumples and she squeezes her eyes.

"Should I go?" John asks as soon as he can count on his voice.

"Would you ever forgive yourself if you didn't?" she replies as soon as she can trust hers.

"No. But there are so many things already I don't forgive myself."

"Oh, those are ordinary, a penny for a baker's dozen. You don't need any more of them.

Second chances are not ordinary."

A knot loosens in John's chest at the words.

"Quite. Right. I'm..."

The phone rings again.

*Please*

the message says.

"...going."

John blushes.

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*Shanghai, Wednesday*

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It's 10:01 am CST in Shanghai.

Starbuck's is half-full, mainly foreigners.

It's bitter cold outside, a stiff westerly breeze bringing in the slightly rotting smell of the Yangtze.

A man walks in, stops for half a second, searching, then makes a bee-line to a table in the opposite corner.

"You came," says the man already sitting there.

"I always come."

"How..."

"...was it? Bad. And you?"

"Worse than I thought."

"And now? Why did you call?"

"Now it's over. I caught them all."

"So no more danger that I may find a way to help you, isn't it so?"

"No more danger that you may be killed. You, Martha, Greg. Molly."

"But I'm a soldier. Was."

"This war had no rules of engagement."

"And you believe in rules of engagement...?"

"No."

For a long moment they just stare at each other.

Sherlock sees John's guarded eyes, squared shoulders, chin held up. John H. Watson in battle mode.

John sees thin lines of worry and exhaustion on Sherlock's face. The man catching up with the boy.

"Three years to the day," John says.

Sherlock nods once and closes his eyes. John sees two tears leaving twin shining tracks down his cheeks. He reaches with his knee to touch Sherlock's under the table.

"What is it?"

"I believe I'm happy."

And Sherlock blushes.

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*Muffins courtesy of Mr. Algernon Moncrieff (OSCAR WILDE, The Importance of Being Earnest, act II). Because I needed a few more words, and why not borrow from the best?*

*Title thanks to Athina Cenci, Ad ovest di Paperino by Alessandro Benvenuti, 1981.*

*This is for j.i.k., who's going.*