

A technical matter

by mazaher
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The story behind one detail in Nostos.

Brit-picked by shinnyluvssuju. Betaed by athens7. Thank you, you're fantastic!

I hope there are no major factual mistakes in here (if there are, they're all mine), and that no-one will feel offended by the details.

I have used my imagination only on the package. I didn't need to use it on the contents.

Note: **Sm**: samarium; **Sn**: tin

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The first six hours or so are the easiest.

After he is knifed (between fifth and sixth left ribs, parietal pleura grazed but not pierced, lung intact, moderate blood loss, no loss of consciousness);

after he manages to alert Mycroft by text (speed-dial #2 on his new, now blood-spattered mobile phone);

after an ambulance disguised as delivery van has picked him up (knife extracted, wound cleaned and sutured, tetanus immunoglobuline shot administered-- his left leg would hurt for days afterwards);

after he is helped around the corner and up a flight of stairs and deposited in an anonymous single-room flat in an anonymous building in rue de Saragosse, Mosson, Montpellier, with a store of:

-- six bottles of water

-- three rehydrating drip pouches and steel stand

-- fifteen vials of 500 mg sodium amoxicillin

-- a blister of Ixprim

-- assorted medical equipment

-- a battery charger for his mobile, and

-- a cardboard box of nutrient bars,
Sherlock knows enough to keep busy.

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He counts on what remains of the current rush of adrenalin to set himself for what is likely to be a hard few days. He's left with assurances of a visit every couple of nights, but he's going to be mostly on his own, lest the comings and goings blow the flimsy cover of this place.

When the door clicks shut, he slips out of his shoes and socks, then walks slowly to the small bathroom, uses the loo, and somehow manages to wash his hands and face, moving his left arm as little as he can.

He's never been wounded, not nearly so badly, but he's been reading up on the basics since he was eight and he wanted to be a pirate. Theory doesn't help as much as he hoped, nor the discovery that he's rather more fond of his own hide than he previously thought. Even the comparatively straightforward procedure of setting himself with a venous catheter is trickier than it should, given his previous experience with less-than-legal IVs.

His hands tremble slightly.

But the catheter is a necessity: it will allow dosing himself when, as he expects, he will be past being able injecting by syringe.

He is aware that everything is likely going to get much worse, very soon.

He sticks a strip of plaster over the catheter to keep it in position, then he looks around the bare room, taking stock.

Curtains drawn, blinds half-closed: a compromise. Daylight is going to hurt his eyes when the fever will rise, but he will need some help from the lamps on the street to find his way around in the dark without turning the lights on.

He left the vasistas open in the bathroom for gentle air circulation. He hopes no-one will notice.

Bending as little as possible, he drags a small tea-trolley next to the queen-sized bed and arranges some necessities: a bottle of water, which he cracks open with his right hand while holding it between his knees; two nutrient bars; the antibiotics; the Ixprim. He decides to dispense with the drip. Instead, he opens all the bottles of water, turns the caps back on loosely, and stores them on the lower tray.

The pain is growing, and by the time he's finished, breathing is getting difficult.

He slips out of his jacket and trousers, not quite able to stifle a groan, and stretches himself on the bed in his briefs and shirtsleeves.

He feels the unusual need to weep.

This is a technical matter, he tells himself. Like an experiment. Emotions are unwanted.

"Kids should be seen, not heard," a thin, disdainful voice (Violet's) whispers in his ear.

"Late again, Holmes," grumbles another (his Greek master's, the morning he'd spent two hours on the school rooftop, deliberating whether to jump). "Take your Plutarch, *Life of Flaminius*, chapter 20."

He closes his eyes and concentrates on breathing.

It hurts.

Two hot tears roll down his cheeks.

He ignores them and thinks of blood clots.

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It's hard to find a position he can stand in for more than two minutes: his wound is in front, just below his nipple, but it hurts even more at the back, under the tip of the scapula. The intercostal nerves are clearly damaged.

When he's had enough of useless small shifts of position, he pulls himself up and slowly drinks half a bottle of water. He curses the package designers for the heavy litre-and-a-half bottles, and himself for not providing a glass from the kitchen cupboard.

But it's too late now.

He feels the fever rising, and the mere idea of standing up turns his stomach.

The vial of antibiotic is hard to manage with only one hand; in the end, he has to break off the glass tip with his teeth. The five minutes recommended to inject the liquid through the catheter seem never ending. He gulps down two tablets of Ixprim, places the bottle at hand on the floor next to the bed, and doesn't fall asleep, more like loses consciousness.

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It's still dark when he wakes with a start.

He blinks, then whimpers despite himself at the stab of pain when his muscles contract.

Memories flood him, chasing the shreds of a dream he won't remember afterwards.

With caution, he draws himself upright. A minute of paced breathing restores him enough that he can stretch his hand to the water bottle. He's burning with fever; it's imperative that he doesn't let go of it.

He forces himself to drink in small sips.

After, he leans his head back and falls asleep again, the almost empty bottle still propped between his thighs like an untimely erection.

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The next time he wakes up it's daylight. 6:27 on his mobile.

His mind is clearer, the fever's abated. He needs to piss.

Very slowly he rolls on his side and slips his legs off the bed (what little was left of the water pours out of the bottle, wetting the side of the mattress; nothing to be done about it), then pushes himself up with his right arm, holding the left pressed against his chest.

He was ready for the bright flash of pain shooting along his ribs, but not for the dull ache in his thigh from the tetanus shot.

He stumbles, recovers, curses.

The few steps to the bathroom take four minutes, his hand dragging on the wall as he creeps along, but sitting on the loo and urinating at last is the first real pleasure he remembers since a long time.

He drifts off then and there, his back to the cool lid of the toilet.

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He's chilled when he wakes up, and his left leg is all pins and needles as he heaves himself upright by grasping the rim of the sink. He warms his hands under the tap, splashes some hot water on his face, then struggles toward the bed. Time for his doses.

He gulps down two Ixprim tablets with some water from a new bottle. After a few minutes' rest, he doses himself with antibiotic. When the syringe is finally empty, he's too wired and too exhausted to even contemplate eating one of the nutrient bars. He settles himself against the pillow and tries in vain to get to sleep.

In the end, he recites to himself the alphabetical list of the elements by chemical symbol. He nods off between **Sm** and **Sn**.

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Pain rouses him around midnight. Someone (male, in his mid-thirties, low-level civil servant, going home to wife and one boy after a weekly night of playing *pétanque* at the local club) is shaking him by the shoulder and urgently whispering in his ear in tolerable English with an intolerable accent.

Sherlock tenses, then moans as muscles move that he'd forgotten he even had.

"Listen, I saw to the antibiotic, but you'll have to drink and eat something soon, unless you'd rather have me fit you with the IV drip. Which, truth be told, I never did before, so... Do you need help, use the loo, anything? I'll have to be out of here in two minutes, tops".

"No, I-- No drip. Go."

"Someone else will come in two nights. Mind your doses."

"Quite."

The door clicks shut, a key turns in the latch.

He drinks. He makes it to the bathroom just in time before throwing up water and bile. He doesn't look at himself in the mirror as he rinses his mouth with lukewarm water. It tastes of iron. He gulps a small sip the wrong way. He coughs and retches until he faints. The reason he doesn't bump his head is that his back hits the shower-box first with a muffled thud, propping him up to sit, legs askew, a small red spot spreading slowly on his bandages.

He doesn't have a chance to wonder whether the noise may have given him away.

He comes to with an image in his mind of a lake among hills at dusk, the water still and luminous inside the dark ring of the shore. There was a boat. Perhaps a black snake.

He climbs to his feet. He notices with detachment that he's crying again. The fact is irrelevant. He reaches the bed and crashes in slow motion.

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When he opens his eyes next, he's thirsty and hungry. Must be a good sign. The pain is also slightly less, at least as long as he lays still.

He goes through the routine with his drugs and water bottle. (He's sick of this dull chore taking up so much of his time-- he should be... by now he should be... *merde*.)

A trip to the bathroom goes without accidents.

He tears open with his teeth the wrap of a nutrient bar, and chews small, slow morsels. They stay down: another good sign.

It's raining outside, the smell of wet tarmac and dust seeping inside from the bathroom window.

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Three nutrient bars, two water bottles, four antibiotic doses, six painkiller tablets and five trips to the loo later (he manages to brush his teeth, which makes everything a little bit better even if it's just soap and his own finger), steps come to the door. Someone fumbles with the latch. It's 1:15 am.

He's awake and aware in a second. He feels fear (curious sensation: a sudden flash of acid cold at the base of his spine, radiating upwards).

But there is no need.

The young woman (pet shelter nurse; currently on holiday; single; bisexual; train watcher) holds up a packet of gauze and a bottle of Betadine.

"You look better than they say you did last time," she comments with a quiet smile. Her English is very good. "May I?"

His throat closes at the thought that a stranger is going to touch him, but he has no choice. "Please."

She's quick and delicate, and the pain is no more than a low throbbing as she cleans and dresses the wound.

"It's healing well."

"How long?"

"Three more days in bed, with antibiotics. You can stop Ixprim when you want. The stitches will stay on another ten days. One week or so before you can go outside. Shall I give you a sponge bath?"

He blushes.

"No, thanks."

"Here, an orange for you. There's a shirt, socks and underwear in the *Prisunic* bag. I hope I got the size right."

She leaves.

There is silence.

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Now that the heavy blanket of pain+painkillers has been lifted from his senses, the enemy is boredom, broken by short spells of panic.

He's awake most of the time. Unarmed and relatively helpless as he is, his breath catches in spite of himself whenever footfalls are heard along the corridor. Apart from that, he's wrapped in emptiness.

He has methodically revisited most of his mind palace, from the stately library with its turned columns and wheeled ladders, to the low-ceilinged, echoing attics of childhood readings, and the dark, damp cellars where box after box of deleted materials are stored.

He steps on something underfoot there, that he's unable to delete yet.

He wonders if he ever will.

It's the surprise he felt when the knife plunged into him.

The surprise of finding himself mortal.

Jumping from St. Bart's had been a choice: part of a plan (if very likely one which involved him being dead on landing). Not a surprise. Not unexpected, like turning a corner and almost bumping into his quarry, who had stopped a moment to light a cigarette.

But it makes sense: after all, being dead and being mortal are two separate things.

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By the fifth day, he's desperate.

Last night the young woman came again, with food and a message. *Esau says no more visits. Stay put until text. Don't pace, it alerts neighbours.*

Since then, nothing. He's out of his skin with nerves. The stitches pull and itch. His legs won't stay still on the bed. He has nothing to do: nothing to read, nothing to write on or with, the nutrient bars don't decompose in any interesting way, the shower has been recently scrubbed with chlorine so no mold to be seen. He's counted the cracks in the ceiling twice already, and he has catalogued all the residents and regular visitors of the building by the sounds they make.

He's tempted not to flush the toilet, just so that he has something to observe, but what if someone catches the smell and gets the idea that there's a faulty drain somewhere?

He can't sleep.

Whenever he nods off, he dreams cruel dreams.

Whenever he's awake, cruel thoughts assail him of steel on living flesh, scalpels and switchblades and butcher's knives, or needles, or teeth and claws.

Around lunchtime he's at his considerable wits' end.

He knows he shouldn't, not yet, but he takes off his shirt and briefs, peels off his bandages, and takes a shower.

The spray is lukewarm and weak, but it's enough that he wobbles at the pressure, and has to steady himself with his good arm on the cool grey tiles.

Water sluices on his chest, on the stitches, collecting between the angry, oblique red edges of the wound and dripping down to his hip like a miniature waterfall.

The sensation is hypnotic.

After a while, he forces himself to pick up the soap bar and lather himself.

There is no shampoo, so he uses soap on his hair also.

His hands slide on his limbs along familiar routes, but the feeling is different somehow. He finds himself exploring his own body like he hasn't in twenty years. He pays attention.

This ...transport, this fragile thing of cells and secretions, has almost been destroyed twice already in as many months. It aches and prickles. It enjoys the careful touch of his hands and the cool, clean rush of water on skin. He cards his fingers through the dark curls between his legs, along the soft length of his sleeping penis and the silky sac of his balls. Gingerly he bends to soap his thighs, then he presses his back to the wall as he balances on one leg and picks up the other to wash his calves and feet in turn. He still doesn't have full motion range on the wounded side, but he manages to rinse himself thoroughly without mishap.

The towel is rough and pleasant, but there are pale pink spots on it when he drapes it on the sink.

He cleans the weeping wound with Betadine, testing the stitches. There is a small pair of scissors among his equipment. He can't resist and snips one stitch open, pulling it out by the knot with his thumb and index finger like a small black spider with long legs. The lips of the wound open like a tiny mouth, and a drop of blood and serum oozes out. It will scar. He puts the scissors away and dresses the wound with new gauze pads and plaster.

The onslaught of thoughts picks up again in less than twenty minutes.

He tucks the end of the blanket under his long thin chilled feet, and feels marginally safer.

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He never thinks about John.

He can't afford it.

Actually, he doesn't think about any *person*, only objects and facts and things to do.

He never thinks about himself either, but this is nothing new.

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On the sixth day, he's out of bed at dawn.

He's showered, re-bandaged and cleaned up his clothes as best he could with tap water, soap and nailbrush.

He's grateful for charcoal-coloured cool wool: it masks well what's left of the blood-stains, and once dry the smell of iron has also mostly waned.

He takes the catheter out in one smooth pull, surprised at the sudden trickle of blood. There are no more gauze pads, so he dresses the tiny hole with a wad of toilet paper and a last strip of plaster.

Now he's fully clothed. Barefoot. Useless.

He turns on his heels, surveying the room. Better tidy up, he may have to leave in a hurry.

There is a roll of black plastic bags under the kitchenette sink: he fills one with the nutrient bar wraps, the empty Ixprim blister, the glass amoxicillin vials, the paper tissues and discarded bandages, the empty water bottles. He stops himself before crushing them: they'd crackle.

He gathers the orange rinds in his hand. They still smell fresh, comforting; he pockets them. They may help disguise the residual smell of blood if Moran is using tracking dogs. Moving about the room feels good. Aching, but good, and he doesn't feel dizzy either-- well, not much.

His eyes fall on the unused kitchenette, on the unmade bed, the sheets mussed and sweaty after his feverish days.

He won't lie in that bed anymore.

He won't wait for Mycroft's text.

Time to go.

He pulls off the sheets, stuffs them in the bag with the rest of the rubbish, then adds the damp towel and the bar of soap.

He carefully wipes his fingerprints off every surface he's touched. He hopes he didn't miss any from the first hazy couple of days.

His shoes are next the door, paired and patiently waiting. The only blood on them is on the sole, and it's long dried. He slips on the new pair of socks (black, good), then the shoes (strange, trapped sensation). The pain of bending at the waist to tie the strings is promptly deleted.

The key is on a shelf beside the door. He picks it up, slips it in the latch, turns it, and without giving himself time to *think* (and be afraid)

...he steps out.

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The text arrives two hours, five minutes, thirteen seconds later.

He's sitting in the shade of an elm in the Parc de Montmaur, watching through binoculars as Col. Sebastian Moran takes his daily shooting practice at the *stand de tir* of the Société de Tir de Montpellier in Rue de Mende. He doesn't seem to be quite as good as they say.

"Should not have moved."

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"Don't be absurd. I always worry."

"Well, quit. There's work to be done here."

He can almost hear the sigh.

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