

Weird. A rat's tail trip in three parts and seventy-one turns.

by mazaher

October to December 31, 2012

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*Thank you to pennypaperbrain, who won't allow Sherlock to be tamed, or worse, broken in the name of conformity. I'm not sure at all that this is what she'd call a weird Sherlock; but this is a partial catalogue of my very own for Sherlock's weirdness, which would not have been compiled without her input. Penny, I wish you a *much* better year.*

Thank you to athens7, who still won't forgive Mark Gatiss' Sherlock for THoB, and so makes me think hard of new ways to try. Athens, tell me whether this fits the bill. Or tell me what would, and I'll write that too...

Thank you to Jns, for her words which led to a last bit of hope for Sherlock, for all the late night talks, and for the food!

Also, thank you (a whole lot) to fennishjournal, for her ongoing analysis of Sherlock's psyche on her LJ; for being so generous of her time, insights and encouragement in betaing this story when it was still hot; for pointing out at me a number of additional key bits where Sherlock and I are not into contact; and for her brilliant threesome canon!S/J/Mary.

Finally, thank you to the web, without which, in more ways than one, this would not have been possible.

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The title makes reference to The Mouse's Tale, a concrete poem in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) by Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll; if Moriarty is old Fury, then the Mouse is taking his vengeance in this story. Read it in high-res at

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/76/TheMousesTale.svg/2000px-TheMousesTale.svg.png>.

Rat's tail is also a technique, typically employed in India, for plaiting thin silver bands around a cord to make bracelets, anklets and necklaces.

The locations mentioned in ch. 2 make reference to Matt Harding's video Dancing 2012 at <http://www.wherethehellismatt.com>.

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1. Life as it was before: being, becoming

Power and equality

*Under the shroud of my skin
my tight bones, my breath
like thin wind among the ribs¹*

Sherlock doesn't have much experience with equality: the miraculous situation in which power is even, and so doesn't count, or --even more miraculous-- is deliberately excluded from the equation of a relationship.

As an unruly boy, a troublesome teenager, and a deliberately contrary young adult, the method employed by family to keep him under some measure of control had been discipline enforced through authority. His mother's, his father's on occasion of more grave transgression, and finally his brother's when, growing up, Sherlock had brought his misbehaviours into areas which their parents would not descend to entering.

¹ Sotto il sudario della pelle / le mie ossa tese, il respiro / come vento sottile tra le costole

(Mycroft's persistence in keeping track of him all the way to Montague Street, and the even more unsavoury places where he stocked up on unmentionable necessities, had been for Sherlock no less an annoyance than a surprise).

Then the moment had come when the residual power his family still retained over him, as providers of partial subsistence, had been finally overcome by his newly-acquired financial independence. It had been celebrated with a cocaine shot duly augmented to 8%. The wave of this small personal revolution had never evened out in later years to the relaxed indifference which would have allowed for peace talks of sorts. (Grudges keep well in cold freedom). To the means he had had to employ to afford cutting those last strings, Sherlock never gave a second thought, after.

Needing and asking

*Terror in the night
tar-dark, choking
I lay immobile and wait²*

No wonder that Sherlock doesn't know how to ask.

For a long time as a child he barely needed to, his whims and wishes readily catered for by a string of nannies whose task it was to make him a child who was occasionally seen, but never heard. Later, he learned how to give orders to the servants in the same off-hand, coldly courteous way his father used when dealing with business and his mother when organising tea-parties.

Then he had found himself with something very important to ask for. A pirate's life was a far-fetched career, not altogether impossible in these days of international unrest, but improbable enough to be discounted on practical reasons. However, there was always Senior Service. That was something, he thought, which could fill his life with purpose and adventure; that was a career where he could be part of a team. Perhaps a leader. Hopefully, a perfect one.

Before dinner time on the day he turned fifteen, he asked for audience in the library and solemnly declared his intentions to his stern father, his nervous mother, his thoughtful brother. In nine months he would qualify to join, he said with pride. He had his papers ready. He hadn't expect his father lashing out, his mother's burst of tears, his brother's stony silence, or being sent to his room without supper as punishment, like a wayward child who should be ashamed of himself.

Mycroft had later sneaked upstairs with a last slice of the birthday cake, but the rift between them hadn't healed.

Sherlock had never asked for anything again.

Neither had he forgiven.

Receiving and thanking

*In the hazy glass of dead eyes
I search relief
from humanity³*

Now he doesn't ever ask. What he needs is there for the taking. He can buy what he wants, or on occasion manoeuvre people into giving to him whatever he needs (human eyes; police reports; free meals; tissue samples; a severed head; access to crime scenes; cigarettes; tips and tricks for hand-to-hand combat). He never thanks anybody: not those who take his money, nor those who are dull enough to let themselves be seduced, or cheated, or blackmailed.

He gets by quite well like this.

After all, he doesn't have an expensive lifestyle. His money goes to clothes, equipment, and mobile bills, to say nothing of less legal items, but not to cars, social life, or holidays.

He takes up just enough private cases these days to avoid the nuisance of prostitution.

² Terrore nella notte / scuro come catrame, soffocante / Resto immobile e attendo

³ Nell'opacità di vetro di occhi morti / cerco sollievo / dall'umanità

Listening and saying no

*Each mystery solved is a point scored
against the fear
that there is no sense to things⁴*

That had brewed a bit of a problem at one point.

While it was handy to have a dozen or so loyal customers in his phonebook, some of them had become attached. When he'd found himself faced with one of the least distasteful among them pressing for a stable, monogamous relationship, Sherlock had discovered that he wasn't quite so good at speaking up for himself after all.

The inevitable break-up had been messy. Since then, Sherlock has been extremely careful never to put himself into such a position that anyone may wish to ask anything personal of him.

Simple methods are best: now he doesn't even listen. To people. To their needy voices charged with emotion and unaccountable changes of mood. To their greed: of him, his time, his attention, his compassion, his soul.

He keeps them at arm's length.

He's become *very* good indeed at avoiding any situation where he would have to say "no".

Perfection and the devil

*Death is the boundary
between thought and wordless being
Like a blind man, I touch⁵*

Of course, all this only works as long as he's perfect.

His favourite weapon for getting people to leave him alone is picking on their shortcomings.

He knows enough to expect retaliation if ever he lets his own guard down.

It's not that he cares for what others think about him; more that he cares for what he thinks about himself.

One thing he's learned early on, is that complete concentration has risks of its own. He focuses on particulars, but sometimes the answer he searches for is in the context. He's been known to overlook relevant details, while dissecting less conclusive ones.

He hates barking up the wrong tree.

Yet, "there's always something". The obvious little things others see, and he doesn't, lost after something else that they can't even imagine.

When that happens, when he's startled back to the here-and-now and realises everybody is staring at him, it's not their voice he hears that calls him *Idiot!*

It's the voice of the devil.

The blackest thing is, it's his own voice.

Loneliness and safety

*Will the perfection I strive for
shield me from death,
or will I be shown a hopeless fool?⁶*

"Alone protects me".

Something branded the idea early and deep into Sherlock's heart: so early and so deep than not even immediate evidence (Lestrade, Hudson, John; friendship, fondness, love) can derail it from its set course. Safety in numbers: singular, one. In an emergency, Sherlock will disengage and disappear.

⁴ Ogni mistero chiarito è un punto a favore / contro la paura / che le cose non abbiano senso

⁵ La morte è il confine / tra pensare ed esistere senza parole / Come un cieco, tocco

⁶ La perfezione che inseguo / sarà abbastanza per proteggermi dalla morte, / o si vedrà che sono, senza speranza, un idiota?

The routine is immediate and reflexive. However much he tries to disguise it to himself and others as logical, it is no different than the involuntary whimper of Pavlov's dogs, listening to the ring of the bell which precedes the electric shock.

A lonely childhood is not enough to explain the wasteland in his heart.

He must have been repeatedly abandoned, let down at a number of critical moments.

Someone told him that he could always count on them, but (in all likelihood, more than once) it was shown a lie, and the shows of interest and affection revealed as empty. In the moments that counted for him, he was ...irrelevant.

He must have been young at the time, too young to be free to look for alternatives. Children are prisoners in their families. Once he grew to school age, it was already too late. The damage done. The script too ingrained, subtracted to conscious observation and appraisal.

Sherlock doesn't know, can't even see, how very relevant he is now in the lives of those who are fond of him. How wounded they are by his refusal to take it into his mind (and heart) that getting help is indeed possible; that for his friends giving it would be a relief; and that his accepting it would be a gift for all involved.

He doesn't mean to be insulting. He isn't aware that he is.

John

But now, there is John.

John, who doesn't presume to be a better man.

John, who doesn't assume that the *mores* of society are intrinsically any better than Sherlock's.

John, who doesn't judge.

John, who treats Sherlock as an equal.

John, who is not dazzled by the brilliance like everybody else.

John, who looks at him and **sees** him.

John, who is quietly turning Sherlock's whole world upside down.

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2. Death, and after

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamor, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.

-- JÓZEF KONRAD KORZENIOWSKI (JOSEPH CONRAD), *Heart of Darkness*

While he is dead, Sherlock has a surprising amount of leisure, a small but efficiently lethal travelling kit, and one book: the 1918 Ferroud edition of *La vie des abeilles* by Maurice Maeterlinck, *illustrations de Adolphe Giraldon, gravées en couleurs par Ernest Florian*, which he's stolen from a *bouquiniste* in Paris two days and three hours after... After. He'd received a copy as a gift from *grandmère* for his tenth birthday. It remains, with its inscription traced in nervous spidery cursive, in his small personal library in his childhood bedroom at the Holmes house.

La plupart des êtres ont le sentiment confus qu'un hasard très précaire, une sorte de membrane transparente, sépare la mort de l'amour, et que l'idée profonde de la nature veut que l'on meure dans le moment où l'on transmet la vie.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Tracking down and dismantling Moriarty's organisation takes longer than he'd foreseen. It involves stalking, ambushing, and endless waiting, more often than not in vain. He can't afford to press his quarry, force their hand. Sherlock is learning patience. While he waits, he reads and thinks, retracing the path which brought him to this point. Looking back is not something he is used to do. He's discovering how different things appear when seen from the other side, or from a distance. He has no idea that others are also thinking about him.

*Travel far from what I know
I'll be swept away
I need to know
I can be lost and not afraid
-- ALICIA LEMKE, Trip the Light*

Kigali, Rwanda

Strolling through the city center as a businessman taking time out to see the sights, Sherlock keeps an eye on a small-time trade in DDT-contaminated pyrethrum exported to China, based in the warehouse of a coffee exporter. He locates the spot at the bottom of a blind alley where coded messages are exchanged inside a half-buried tomato soup tin. He bypasses the local authorities, and alerts PAP⁷ anonymously, which entails major hacking into their mail server.

On that first evening with John at Angelo's, Sherlock had found himself listening. More: he had found a way to keep some distance from John without being biting. (Later, he had to fight himself to stop wondering whether keeping his distance from John was really necessary). When Sherlock didn't consider that Harry may stand for Harriet, John didn't call Sherlock an idiot. He called him *brilliant, amazing*. When John did call him *idiot*, his wasn't the devil's voice. It was the voice of a friend, and the devil shut up and retreated.

Seville, Spain

Sherlock follows a false track to Torreblanca de los Caños, then has to wait from Tuesday to Friday for his tourist charter flight.

By the time he was twenty, Sherlock knew that he didn't *want* to be part of the human race. All those people, all those ideas about how life should be lived, what it means, and what's good for one. He didn't want to join them, not through marriage nor through antidepressants. He didn't want to give up "I" for "us". He didn't want his chemistry equipment, his books, his skull (for god's sake) to become "ours". If pressed, he'd rather give up half of them. He wanted to be on his own and left to his own devices, which he knew were different from everybody else's.

La première fois qu'on ouvre une ruche, on éprouve un peu de l'émotion qu'on aurait à violer un objet inconnu et peut-être plein de surprises redoutables, un tombeau par exemple. Il y a autour des abeilles une légende de menaces et de périls. Il y a le souvenir énervé de ces piqûres qui provoquent une douleur si spéciale qu'on ne sait trop à quoi la comparer, une aridité fulgurante, dirait-on, une sorte de flamme du désert qui se répand dans le membre blessé (...)
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Vienna, Austria

Sherlock almost makes his first kill here, but he overhears his target saying something which gives him clues to a wider business in uranium ore. He lets her go, and follows.

For the first time in a very long time, when he'd met John Sherlock had felt enthusiasm not for something, but for someone-- John. The whole force of his soul (that empty word) had flowed over like a waterfall on an object he could call "you".

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Armed_Police

Schuykill Haven, Pennsylvania

Sherlock buys a ticket to a basketball match. He sits behind Moran's fourth-in-command, who later that night would send word to his contractor for the next load of esplanted human kidneys from Brazil to be shipped. A single prick in the neck, like a mosquito's. Sherlock is already gone when one inconspicuous middle-aged man slumps dead in his seat.

The good thing, Sherlock reflects, is that John has slowly been coming to understand. The bad thing, John believes, is that he has come to understand too damn late.

On appelle ruche d'observation, une ruche vitrée munie de rideaux noirs ou de volets. (...) Les abeilles qui habitent celle qui se trouve à Paris, dans mon cabinet de travail, récoltent dans le désert de pierre de la grande ville, de quoi vivre et prospérer.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Damascus, Syria

Sherlock loses track of his quarry here. T-m-ś-q, the place of many waters, washes it away; ash-Sham, the shining, dazzles his eyes into a cruel migraine. He walks the roads, searching for the four gates of Flecker's poem,⁸ but he can't find them. In the middle of a crowded street-market, he can only hear bird-like, piping silence.

An equation in two unknowns traces a curve on the Cartesian plane.

Since he was sent to school and was therefore exposed to other people's opinions for a number of hours every weekday, Sherlock had found himself at a crux between the way he found it natural to think, and the way almost everybody else seemed to think. He asked and asked for their opinions about this and that, trying to find the key which could reconcile the rift, but in vain. They made him angry, and a bit frightened. He argued all the time. (His father coldly observed that next thing he knew, Sherlock would be writing corrections on the margins of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

At nineteen, Sherlock decided he wasn't interested in people's opinions after all. He was tired of arguing. He began to pick his fights. From then on, he only ever asked questions about facts.

Poria, Papua New Guinea

Six weeks on the run (run from, run after). He's coping, adapting, but the fact remains that he's really tired in a way sleep can't really fix. The constant stress of being alone, moving, no base of residence, constantly changing diet, has finally caught up with him. He falls very sick on a train between Vientiane and Nha Trang. He crashes on a cot in a hostel at Babagai and doesn't wake for sixteen hours. Then he rises, goes out to take a piss, and sleeps for nine more. When he opens his eyes, he feels a pleasant chill like an ice cube between his eyes. Everything is clear-cut and bright. A singing starling (*Aplonis cantoroides*)⁹ calls from a *thingan* tree outside. The scientific name of the tree is *Hopea ultima*. He takes it as a good omen.

John --Sherlock thinks every morning as he wakes up-- is an independent man. He can probably deal with whatever life throws at him. If needs be, he can deal with it alone; indeed he has. But John has friends; he knows how to be part of a team. He's never sought loneliness for its own sake, nor as a way to cope. In an emergency --Sherlock tries to remember-- John expects help to be available, but will go ahead anyway if it happens to be not.

Dès qu'il y a progrès quelque part, il ne résulte que du sacrifice de plus en plus complet de l'intérêt personnel, au général. Il faut d'abord que chacun renonce à des vices, qui sont des actes d'indépendance.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

⁸ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-gates-of-damascus/>

⁹ <http://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Aplonis-cantoroides>

Pyongyang, North Korea

A sudden shower catches Sherlock on the street without an umbrella or a jacket, on an early summer morning when shops and cafes are still closed. A man comes along on a bicycle under a heavy waterproof cape. He stops, fumbles in his pocket, pulls out a small plastic bag and without smiling holds it out to Sherlock. Sherlock takes it: it's one of those thin, cheap, but serviceable, single-use waterproof capes. Sherlock follows the man with his eyes as he bicycles away without waiting for his thanks.

In an emergency, Sherlock expects to find himself completely alone, and he's discovering that he doesn't have the faintest idea about what to do with help if it happens to turn up.

Beirut, Lebanon

Five thousand years around the wells, three thousand and five hundred of written history. Destroyed innumerable times, yet always resurrected from its own ruins in gardens and buildings and people crowding its noisy streets. Sherlock learns two facts in Beirut. That some things, like certain trees repeatedly stumped, can be almost eternal. And that he loves hummus on pita¹⁰.

It took time for John to realise that the reason why the Holmes brothers keep their distance from other people is not pure conceit, but primarily the circumstance that nobody ever was able (or just willing) to be there for either of them. What looks at first sight like unreasonable pretension, reveals in time as a hard sense of reality forged in blood and tears, until no tears were left.

Il est midi, et l'on dirait qu'autour de la chaleur qui règne, les arbres assemblés retiennent toutes leurs feuilles, comme on retient son souffle en présence d'une chose très douce, mais très grave.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Athens, Greece

A bunch of threads he's been following come to a head here. The clues he feeds anonymously to the Astynomia¹¹ allow them to take down in one move the whole Eastern European branch of Moriarty's web.

The reason why Sherlock doesn't ask John for sex ~~to enter a committed relationship~~ to love him is not a lack of interest, or concern about officially-straight Capt. John H. "Three Continents" Watson, MD, being hurt at the suggestion. (Sherlock knows John's broadminded enough not to take it badly).

The reason is that Sherlock is scared stiff John would say no, like almost everybody else when Sherlock tried *asking* for something that mattered very much to him.

Lesedi, South Africa

Moriarty had a small business here providing unregistered fire-arms to four of the main gangs (two black, one white, one mixed). Sherlock finds he has to quickly brush up his knife-wielding skills-- shooting is all right in the country, but in Cape Town business is preferably done silently at blade-point. When he leaves, a stowaway on a cargo ship to Phuket, he's disabled the business. He is nursing a long, deep cut along his left forearm.

Sherlock is also scared stiff --having observed certain signs, he is scared stiff-- that it may be John who asks (a second time, after that half-hint at Angelo's).

That would be a disaster.

Because Sherlock couldn't make himself say no a second time.

But this thing which Sherlock knows with perfect clarity would compel him to say "yes" (and very soon to set himself down and study *gratitude*), can not, must not be allowed to come about through a mere compulsion to repeat on his part.

It can only happen through free choice.

¹⁰ <http://gfgastronaut.wordpress.com/2008/06/02/hummus-and-pita/>

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenic_Police

It's the least Sherlock owes John.
John, who knows how to ask without begging, thank with grace, and say no without harshness.

...il est probable que nous sommes à peu près aussi aveugles que nous supposons que le sont les abeilles.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Kapong, Thailand

Children. So many children everywhere. Sherlock doesn't like children. They remember him of when he was small himself.

What exactly changed when he met John?

He'd begun disassembling the smooth, mirroring, impregnable ball he'd painstakingly turned his life into, and reassembling it in a different way, leaving room and an opening for John to fit inside.

The risk for both had been deadly.

Caracas, Venezuela

Children again. In Caracas, Sherlock hacks into the shadowed network used to manage a virtual kidnapping organisation:¹² Moran's idea, not Moriarty's, and a recent development in the organisation's affairs. It takes Sherlock forty-two hours to write a virus, eighteen more for the virusto disable the network. Moran's agents are still at large.

London. Waterloo Place, round the corner from Pall Mall. An early morning, exactly six months After. It's raining outside. The first thing Mycroft remembers as he wakes up is how since he was a teenager Sherlock had been used to hold his head slightly back with respect to the line of his shoulders, like a stargazing horse: a stance of diffidence, tension in his back, an ambling gait.

Mycroft remembers well how Sherlock went wild after *grandmère* died. She was like an old barren mare in a herd-- as long as she was alive, she could kick sense into anyone, including her daughter and her son-in-law. Her lovers, his drinking: neither of Sherlock's parents was at home much, or aware enough, after she died. Mycroft did what he could, but he knows by now he must have done more things wrong than right. Sherlock was jealous of what he saw as his brother's privileges. 'If he can do it, I can also!' But for all his mental precocity, emotional maturity is another pair of shoes.

A un moment donné, toute la grappe s'agite, fourmille, se désagrège, s'éparpille et, d'un vol impétueux et soutenu qui cette fois ne connaît plus d'obstacle, par-dessus les haies, les champs de blé, les champs de lin, les meules, les étangs, les villages et les fleuves, le nuage vibrant se dirige en droite ligne vers un but déterminé et toujours très lointain. Il est rare que l'homme le puisse suivre dans cette seconde étape. Il retourne à la nature, et nous perdons la trace de sa destinée.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Bali, Indonesia

He takes a day off and goes to see the temple at Goa Lawah,¹³ the bats innumerable and peaceful, preening and chittering on the cave's walls. Bats are associated with the threshold to the afterlife. The other world, Sherlock thinks, must be quite crowded.

Sherlock has always had himself on his heels. As soon as he stops, the whole pack catches up, unless he crashes asleep. And even then, ...dreams.

¹² http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1059.html#crime

¹³ <http://www.balitourismboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/goa-lawah-bali.jpg>

League City, Texas

Illegal slaughterhouses. Sherlock can't clean the smell of blood out of his nose for days.

Sherlock has horror of death at work. He doesn't mind corpses. He doesn't mind death in the past tense. But actual death, death while it's happening, is something he literally jumps back from (the cabbie, the killer in the street, Jim on the roof). Yet he was forced to jump into his own.

... arrivé à un certain point de la vie, on ressent plus de joie à dire des choses vraies que des choses frappantes.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Great Barrier Reef, Australia

On a detour, trying to confuse his tracks, Sherlock happens by sheer chance on a five-men gang smuggling coral to Japan. It turns out that they have nothing to do with Moriarty.

Sherlock knows by now that there's a certain dose of a certain sort of damage he's going to do anyway, simply by being alive. He's negotiated with himself that he's going to get even with the world by giving his own unique sort of gifts in exchange.

Al-Muzahmiyya, Saudi Arabia

Sherlock walks four miles in the night northward from Al-Muzahmiyya to the route 505, where he'll be picked up by a truck carrying tonic water from Riyadh to Shaqra. Scattered buildings on his right, empty sand on his left, and the moon. The smell of the desert, completely truthful.

Sherlock is a perfectionist by nature, and a second son with a perfect, much older sibling. It would have taken very sensitive, clever parents to prevent him feeling chronically insecure. He has indeed developed a personal, creative worldview in which he has a satisfying place, but no illusions are warranted about what it cost him.

Car la cire qui naît ne ressemble pas à celle que nous connaissons tous: elle est immaculée, impondérable, elle paraît vraiment l'âme du miel, qui est lui-même l'esprit des fleurs, évoquée dans une incantation immobile, pour devenir plus tard entre nos mains, en souvenir, sans doute, de son origine où il y a tant d'azur, de parfums, d'espace cristallisé, de rayons sublimés, de pureté et de magnificence, la lumière odorante de nos derniers autels.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Oakland, California

On the ruthless numbered grid of the city streets, Sherlock plays a chess match with an invisible enemy.

There must be a hidden layer of self-hate which makes Sherlock use extreme means in order to always keep his brain functioning at maximum performance, never giving himself a break. Like he believes he doesn't deserve to be alive, unless he's in permanent active service as a genius.

He always thought he would die young anyway.

*Remember we're lost together
Remember we're the same
We hold the burning rhythm in our hearts
We hold the flame*

-- ALICIA LEMKE, *Trip the Light*

Detroit, Michigan

Southfield Public Library, 6 pm in late winter. Three hours to closing time It's dark outside. Sherlock needs to read up about stem cells: one of Moran's agents is trafficking in human embryos. He's always felt most comfortable around books,

but the wide spiral staircase, the low ceilings and immense floors, the artificial warmth and the lamps on the desks, are making him nervous with no apparent reason. He crams information as fast as he can, and leaves, shoulders hunched, head down, into the cutting northern wind.

A right to live.

Sometimes he doubts. It is then that he picks up the scalpel and sets to work on his thighs, his groin, drawing blood. In control of his own punishment.

... les vices des hommes, par la même raison, produisent une vertu générale, qui est suffisante pour que l'espèce humaine, souvent odieuse dans ses individus, ne le soit pas dans son ensemble.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Terelj, Mongolia

Sapporo to Lahore through Ulaanbataar. Sherlock breathes in the silence and vast spaces, choking him like ozone in his lungs. His broken metatarsal is healing, although not quite aligned.

There was that time when John came home earlier than expected. Sherlock was hard at work on himself, curled on the sofa, naked inside the soft shell of his silk robe. Violin abandoned on the sofa, correspondence scattered in front of the hearth, blood dripping on a towel. John hadn't said a word. He'd taken the jackknife from his hands, and kissed them (the right, the left, then both), then kneeled and kissed the small wounds on Sherlock's inner thighs, his belly. Licking blood off his own lips, in silence.

Rangali Islands, Maldives

An albatross sailing on the first ray of sunlight. It is hard to kill a man on a tourist resort island. Even harder to kill a woman. Almost impossible to escape undetected. But by now Sherlock is used to the impossible.

And yet, such potential for sheer joy. If only the cataracts of what is evil in the world --the killings, the lies-- would cease pouring down the sinkhole that is Sherlock's heart, and happiness was allowed to gush out instead.

... tout est triste dans la nature quand on la regarde de près. Il en sera ainsi tant que nous ne saurons pas son secret, ou si elle en a un. Et si nous apprenons un jour qu'elle n'en ait point ou que ce secret soit horrible, alors naîtront d'autres devoirs qui peut-être n'ont pas encore de nom.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Ruwa, Zimbabwe

As Sherlock works to gather evidence against a network of corruption in management of public funds, he is puzzled, then disgusted, by the rivalry between the army and the police. He wonders how Mycroft can stand working for the government.

At fifteen, Grandmère died. It was a nasty cancer. In the end, it was Sherlock who killed her, injecting her with a morphine overdose when she asked him.

At sixteen, Sherlock wanted to die himself. What stopped him --strangely-- was a National Geographic documentary on siphonophores. 120ft of *Praya dubia*, snaking its way, a line of points of light, in the endless dark of the abyss.

At seventeen, Sherlock decided that he wouldn't die before damn *showing* them: his disappointed parents, his worried brother, his bombastic teachers, God, everyone.

At eighteen, Sherlock cashed from the bank the small sum Grandmère had left him, rented a flat in Montague Street, bought the cheapest household implements he could find, and raided the dumpsters for discarded furniture. Sometimes, also for food.

Il est juste qu'avant de nous plaindre, qu'avant de juger la nature, nous achevions de l'interroger.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Budapest, Hungary

Sherlock catches up with the quarry he'd let go in Vienna, and dispatches her before dawn after a short hand-to-hand combat on the deserted Árpád Bridge. Her neck cracks audibly as he breaks it. Her body barely makes a splash in the muddy waters of the Danube underneath. Sherlock takes a breath and walks away. Taking lives is draining. He's cold.

"You look, but you don't observe". People on the pavement, people at the pub, or queuing up at the post office... Sherlock never had a sense for privacy. He looks and observes. His eyes break open imaginary locks keeping strangers' eyes from the intimacy of one's own being, and steals whatever he wants.

Port-au-Prince, Haiti

For a man who claims to have only one friend, and who passes for a freak with the police force, Sherlock has a facility for being liked at first sight. Based in a shack in Cité Soleil, he quickly builds a network of irregulars whose help is key in breaking a weapons trade managed directly by Moran. Before leaving, he buys a refrigerator and a washing machine to be shared by the neighbourhood.

From the very first night, Sherlock has found himself surprisingly eager for John to be co-star.

Un concours de circonstances qui n'avait rien de nécessaire.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Erbil, Iraq

It seems the Four Gods which named the place 6000 years ago could do nothing to stop the traffic of pre-Islamic artifacts pillaged from the local museum after the second Gulf war in 2003. Sherlock uproots the organisation linked to Moriarty's network in four days, and leaves the rest to shrivel up on its own.

There's no denying it: even Lestrade must admit that Sherlock can be cruel. But Sherlock didn't take advantage of weakness, of old women and children and the hopes and dreams and the wishful thinking of people, like Moriarty did. Sherlock nipped and bit at equals, leaned heavily on the force of nature that is John Watson, and searched for the most dangerous enemy to fight.

Maui, Hawaii

As Sherlock follows the track of a money courier involved in a secret agreement between some farming companies and the local authorities to use cheaper, polluted water on the pineapple cultivations, he is caught in a sugarcane field fire. He runs. With him run or fly mice, *nene* (*Branta sandvicensis*),¹⁴ lizards, *nananana makaki'i* (*Theridion grallator*).¹⁵ He makes it. Not all the others do. He pockets a half-burnt specimen of cane spider (*Heteropoda venatoria*) to dissect later, then he forgets about it.

As long as anyone was entitled to take care of him (his steely mother, his stern father, nannies, schoolmasters, teachers, tutors), they all worried about him. They frowned and cleared their throats and fixed appointments with doctors and psychologists. None of their attempts at normalisation worked out well. Sherlock was too clever for them all-- except for Mummy.

Then, one late afternoon, they happened to meet in the hall as she was going out to see her current lover and he was coming back from neuropsychiatrist no. 4. Neither did speak. He stared at her, and she lowered her eyes. He was eleven.

It could never work. The criteria of success in the proposed therapies were invariably external: whether Sherlock was going to be more socially active, more useful in the community, or at least less of a nuisance to the adults. Not internal ones, whether he would be going to be more himself, much less whether he would be happier (such an uncertain definition!). What

¹⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nene_\(bird\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nene_(bird))

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theridion_grallator

happened was the rise of a dull anger at the attempt to erase what made him who he was; at the fact that it was that which had to go, instead of the rest of the world (so vast, already so diverse) making room for him. For how he saw things. For what he believed was right. Instead they surrounded him, crowded him with horrible things which he saw, and they didn't, or didn't seem to mind, relentless until he surrendered. But he never did. Sherlock knew from a very young age that if ever he would go really crazy, it would never be in the "normal" way. Never in the Stockholm syndrome way.

...c'est au fond de l'inconnu, que nous choquons contre du moins connu encore, pour faire un petit bruit qui nous donne conscience du plus haut degré de l'existence particulière que nous puissions atteindre sur cette même surface muette et impénétrable (...) Il n'en reste pas moins, qu'un de nos devoirs les plus certains est de produire ce petit bruit chaque fois que l'occasion s'en présente, sans nous décourager parce qu'il est vraisemblablement inutile.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

New Orleans, Louisiana

His cover blown, Sherlock becomes a quarry himself. He gets lost in Terrytown, and takes refuge in Christ the King's Church on Deerfield Road, hiding in an empty, old-fashioned confessional (an import from Spain, XVII-century walnut, treated recently with raw linseed oil).

He's frightened.

For the first time he has the certainty of death. Now or later, sudden or slow, on his own terms or more likely not, he will be dead, in reality and forever. This time, he escapes.

Sometimes, when everything is too much, he slips into playing according to the world's rules. The *real* rules, not the bowdlerised version found in political programmes, New Year's Day speeches, titles on leading newspapers, school textbooks, and accountable declarations by Mycroft.

Quezon City, Philippines

Sherlock is exhausted. He falls asleep on a bus on Luzon Avenue, misses his stop, and walks back a mile and a half under a merciless sun to Sampaguta. He sends the note clinching the case against one branch of the fake diplomas trade, directed by the sixth in command under Col. Moran, then crashes on his hotel bed for eighteen hours.

At those times something hard takes command, something cold, cruel and very serious. At those times, he feels like he will never smile again.

... les apiculteurs appellent le soleil d'artifice. Il faudrait plutôt dire le soleil d'inquiétude. On voit en effet qu'elles ont peur, elles qui sont filles de l'ombre étroite et de la foule, on voit qu'elles ont peur de l'abîme azuré et de la solitude infinie de la lumière (...)
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Kabul, Afghanistan

This is the land where John fought and was shot. By the time he gets here, once again on the track of an illegal weapons trade, Sherlock is so tired and his mind is so wounded with the blood he's drawn and shed himself, that every contact hurts.

He sits on top of a roof at dawn, binoculars in hand, and watches a long-legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*)¹⁶ lazily circling with stretched wings, barely touched by the first rays of sunlight. Both of them raptors on the hunt, hungry and too lean. Neither can allow himself any weakness.

He watches the pure beauty of the flight, and tears fill his eyes. He doesn't know why. His hunt is going well, his fight to go home (to John). The price is high for all involved, but this is

¹⁶ <http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/article-hawks-buteo-other-continents.html> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54yuI2Weif0>

nothing new. He remembers the first verse of a poem about a hawk he read a quarter century ago, and his breath catches.¹⁷

Toulon, France

*Enfin, Sherlock thinks as he disembarks on the quay, Quelq'un qui parle français.*¹⁸

Sherlock has found himself face to face with violent death twice after he met John. There is a whole world between them. His hand trembled minutely when his bunched fingers raised the capsule to his eyes as he discussed a death pact with a murderer, but his mind was calm and clear, uncluttered, smooth and perfect like a gyroscope. He was shaking all over, and he was crying for the first time in more than twenty years, while he stood on a rooftop saying goodbye to John down on the pavement. He knew then that John had given him a life he'd never had, and that "it is death for the souls to turn into water".¹⁹

La planchette d'abordage, qui n'est souvent que le prolongement du tablier ou plateau sur lequel est posée la ruche, forme une sorte de perron, de palier ou de repos, devant l'entrée principale ou trou de vol.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Beijing, China

Bad Chinese food in a third-rate restaurant gives him a gut infection it takes him two months to eradicate. The lower third of the door handle gave the place away quite obviously, but he couldn't afford any better at the time, and street food in the area looked even more suspicious.

The cities are beginning to fade into one another in his memory. The white marble of that column, fluted, smooth, was it in Potsdam or Washington? That thick lentil soup, Thessaloniki or Toledo? The shop signs and shop windows bleed together, the multi-language labels on the supermarket shelves join in a noisy chatter. He thinks in Franglish, dreams in Russczech, plans in Vieturdu and swears in Sinditamil.

Jerusalem, Israel

The stolen cars trade that Moriarty's network directs here is harmless enough in comparison with his other endeavours.

He is working in haste, trying to finish his half-done job before the thin inner thread he's hanging on be broken by the hopelessness of exhaustion. He's not afraid he won't be able to do it; he's afraid at some point he may not care to anymore.

Elles sont alors victimes de ce qu'on nomme, «la fièvre d'essaimage» qui est, comme la fièvre ordinaire, une sorte de réaction trop ardente de la vie, réaction qui dépasse le but, ferme le cercle et retrouve la mort.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Opuwo, Namibia

"That's enough". It's the name of this place, dusty and quiet under the low sun which gives a long, long shadow to each pebble on the dirt road. Sherlock ends

¹⁷ *The Falcon To The Falconer*, by Jonathan Steffens (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-falcon-to-the-falconer/>):

*Unleash me from your hand
And I will lance the light for you
I'll cut a swordblade on the wind
And pennant it with flight for you
To signal I am yours
If you will free me to be true to you.*

¹⁸ In reality, Colette's comment on meeting a kitten in an alley in New York.

¹⁹ HERACLITUS OF EPHESOS, *Fragment 36*.

up here by mistake, misreading a note in code. He looks north... But he goes south, then west.

Life is cruel. Sherlock didn't make it so. He knows he can't change this fact, only work with it. He's not so mad as to question God.

San Juan, Puerto Rico

In Toa Alta he stands under the Cannonball tree (*Couroupita nicaraguensis*), the only one on the island. He looks up, then down at their parallel shadows. He draws a quick calculation, comparing height and life expectancy. He isn't inclined to bet on himself.

He's never really been able to see the ontological difference between Humans on one side and the Rest of Reality on the other, which everybody else seems to take as a given. Matter (living matter as well as not) appears as a continuum to him. He's been reproached as lacking compassion for his fellows. He can't understand what they mean, and it's maddening, like for a daltonic trying to grasp the concept of colour.

(Nobody ever seems to notice that he applies the same ruthless standards to himself.)

...chaque fois que, dans leurs passes, les deux vierges aux cuirasses de chitine se mettent dans une position telle qu'en tirant leur aiguillon elles se perceraient réciproquement (...) les deux guerrières, prises d'épouvantes qui s'accordent, se séparent et se fuient, éperdues, pour se rejoindre peu après, se fuir encore si le double désastre menace de nouveau l'avenir de leur peuple, jusqu'à ce que l'une d'elles réussisse à surprendre sa rivale imprudente ou maladroite, et à la tuer sans danger, car la loi de l'espèce n'exige qu'un sacrifice.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Belgrade, Serbia

Faded graffiti on the wall. It is curious, Sherlock reflects, that ephemeral things like graffiti can endure a long time through weather, war and competition. Then he ducks as a silenced bullet whispers above his head.

Two things nobody ever forgives him: his mind and his *sprezzatura*, the elegant effortless in doing something nearly impossible. The whole world would have loved him for that in the Renaissance. But the concept is virtually proscribed nowadays-- unless in sports, for which he has no interest. Rousseau destroyed the appeal of being special, Romanticism drugged the minds with the ecstasy of effort, and the whole world rejoiced at the Fall.

...sa colère inassouvie se promène de rayon en rayon, y faisant retentir ce chant de guerre ou cette plainte menaçante que tout apiculteur connaît, qui ressemble au son d'une trompette argentine et lointaine, et qui est si puissant dans sa faiblesse courroucée qu'on l'entend, surtout le soir, à trois ou quatre mètres de distance, à travers les doubles parois de la ruche la mieux close. (...) On croit d'ailleurs que c'est grâce au prestige de ce cri qu'il imite, que le Sphinx Atropos pénètre dans les ruches et s'y gorge de miel, sans que les abeilles songent à l'attaquer.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Boise, Idaho

Sherlock infiltrates the Boise State University Engineering Technology Building and hacks into the electron backscatter diffraction system.²⁰ He needs to identify the microstructural features of the toxic crystals mixed with a deadly batch of methadone recently used to hook six-graders in local schools.

Querencia. The word flashes through Sherlock's mind one night as he tries in vain to sleep. *Home. Nest. Safety*. The corner of the ring where the wounded bull goes to take his breath before the next charge. The place where one can center, focus. Where he knows exactly who he is. The place of deepest beliefs. Even unto death.

The place where Sherlock wants to return.

The place where John is.

²⁰ <http://coen.boisestate.edu/bscmc/>

*I'll find my way home
On the Western wind
To a place that was once my world
Back from where I've been
-- ALICIA LEMKE, Trip the Light*

Edinburgh, Scotland

Another dead end: the killer Sherlock's been after escapes, boarding at the last moment the Transpennine from Waverley Station to Manchester Airport. Sherlock is left panting on platform 14.

Almost home. Almost. So near. So irreparably distant. Yet the crowded sky over the old city, heavy with rain, is nearest in his heart to the flocks of small white clouds on the rolling fields of Sussex, dotted with big golden straw bales in early July; in the same way a chilly pavement in late January is the nearest thing to a cheerful fire burning in a hearth. And two armchairs, and two friends with a glass of brandy in their hands.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Gunshots are so *noisy*. Sherlock will take hand-to-hand combat any day.

Sherlock is catching himself mumbling under his breath more often than usual. He has no time to question what exactly he is ashamed of. Or that is what he tells himself.

*Mais comme son cri doit percer les parois d'une tombe, il est très différent, étouffa, caverneux, et l'éleveur d'abeilles qui s'en vient vers le soir, lorsque les bruits se couchent dans la campagne, et que s'élève le silence des étoiles, interroger l'entrée des cités merveilleuses, reconnaît et comprend (...)
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, La vie des abeilles*

Robben Island, South Africa

From the lighthouse, Sherlock stares out to the ocean. It does look like the end of the world.

Lestrade wakes suddenly at 03:13 am with the image of a powerful wave breaking on dark brown, ancient outcrops of dolerite.²¹ And blood --somehow he knows it's human-- pooling in seawater.

Toronto, Canada

A low overall crime rate is ideal for quiet transnational endeavours such as bank card counterfeiting. Sherlock settles into a hotel room in Mississauga and hacks server upon server for three weeks, infecting them with viruses he scripts himself, until a whole branch of the late Moriarty's network is in shreds. It is the first thrill of real pleasure, the first moment of grace he experiences since he died.

There are times when Sherlock sees people, things, streets, landscapes as clouds of sparks. The sparks gather, shimmer, brighten in halos and rays around contours. If he focuses narrowly, the images explode in points of light. If he softens his gaze, they coalesce in shapes and details.

When it happens, he knows he won't sleep that night, or the next.

*Swammerdam cite une ruche qui, par ses essaims et les essaims de ses essaims, produit ainsi trente colonies en une seule saison.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, La vie des abeilles*

²¹ <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/geolsci/dlr/robben/dolerite.jpg>

Dresden, Germany

It's raining in Dresden as Sherlock steps out of the Internet Café on Rothenburger Str. 43, where he mailed the Polizei all the relevant details about one more of Moran's hired killers. He goes south along Hoyerswerdaer Strasse, then left on Tieck, right on Weintrauben, he crosses Melanchton Strasse, Canusfer, and he reaches the Rosengarten along the Elbe. He doesn't like the layout --too like a military parade-- but the garden is empty in the drizzly afternoon, and he urgently needs to be alone for a while. He needs it more than he can usually afford it these days.

Homesick? Yes, for the scent of the lime trees at home in June, and the weeping willow in whose shade Mycroft read him Byron's *The Corsair* when Sherlock was eight.

Lyon, France

Sherlock almost panics here. He's been spotted by Moran's surveillance as he watched the comings and goings of unsuspectable drug runners in the backyard of the Police station in Rue de la Terrasse. He's flushed out and followed, no, herded toward Le Gros Caillou, then Cours d'Herbouville in the direction of the Rhône and Pont Winston Churchill. The irony doesn't escape him. "If you're going through hell, ...keep going" is one of Churchill's quips Sherlock has never deleted, and so he walks on, trying in vain to shake his pursuers. He doesn't dare to take a taxi: he has ample proof of Moriarty's dealings with the business in London, and can't risk it here, given that at least nine men have been involved so far in stalking him, on foot and by car. When at long last he loses the last one by sneaking out of a broom closet's window at the FNAC store in Boulevard Merle, he's breathless with fear more than exhaustion.

He still has little experience of fear, and this scares him even more. His main reference is what happened at Baskerville: the unthinkable, blinding anguish and the subsequent, unwise, desperate attempt on his part at rational data gathering about how an expert at dealing with fear (his own and other people's) reacts to crippling terror.

There was only one man whose friendship he could expect to survive the experiment. He almost lost him. He learned then that knowledge --even knowledge essential for survival-- can come at too high a price.

Sherlock had been used to thinking that test materials for his experiments was on unlimited supply, only the inexplicable ill-will or the irrecoverable idiocy of his providers making it necessary for him to occasionally go out of his way to procure it. There would always be another batch of eyeballs, of toenails, of frozen flamingos or of dishes and kettles ready for the taking. But it seems the supply of John Watsons is not unlimited at all. It is limited to one-digit numbers. It is actually limited to only one.

...quand l'amour l'égaré si loin de la ruche nouvelle, que la route encore inaccoutumée du retour vacille et se disperse, dans toutes les mémoires.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

USS Abraham Lincoln, Pacific Ocean

A stowaway between bomb crates. Sherlock hopes for a quiet sea; if the crates slide sideways, he's dead. If the crates stand still, but he's found, on a US aircraft carrier, with false documents (well-made, but not foolproof), not even Mycroft would be able to fish him out of the mess.

As a child, Sherlock loved slipping and curling in the narrow space between the kitchen wall and the first cupboard of the row. There, in the cool darkness, pressure at his back and on his sides, he felt safe in a space of his own. He could stop thinking, and just listen. Sounds say so much about what grown ups really are like-- something quite different from what they say they are.

Houston, Texas

He can't sleep for 96 hours.

Only now Sherlock realises that on the very first evening, when Mycroft questioned John in an echoing warehouse and Sherlock called him across London to pick out Sherlock's mobile from the pocket of his jacket, his brother and he had really the same agenda: testing John's limits. Mycroft found out that John couldn't be manoeuvred by a stranger. Sherlock found out that John would allow himself to be manoeuvred by... a prospective flatmate? an acquaintance? a friend? None of the labels seem to quite fit.

Qui leur donne cette énergie, que nous n'avons jamais, à rompre avec le passé comme avec un ennemi?

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Bratislava, Slovakia

Sometimes things seem to just unravel, hopeless, unrecoverable. Sometimes Sherlock would rather be dead for real.

There had been Sunday mornings in Montague Street when he would spike himself to Velvet Underground screaming in his headphones, and stare at stereograms. *All Tomorrow's Parties* tided him forward and over until the hollows in the pictures reversed into bumps, and the bumps jumped out of the page, or the screen, and follow his retreating eyes, like a bunch of rabbits pressing on him.

Melbourne, Australia

A narrow alley between high walls covered with graffiti. A car crosses at the end, slows down and almost stops. In a fraction of a second, Sherlock knows there's a sniper inside, bent to kill him. He waits for the muffled sound of a silenced shot before throwing himself to the ground. He's not fast enough to escape unharmed, but the bullet reaches him in the upper left arm instead of in the chest. The car speeds away. He loses consciousness.

*Two rented brothers race down two separate alleys
Heading for the finish line*

Mycroft has always wondered what his younger brother and he had in common, has always wondered what made them incompatible.

*Two rented brothers. Their faces keep changing
Just like these feelings I have for you*

John has never been able to really understand what linked the Holmes brothers either, or what separated them. He knows it is there, feels its shape and tensile strength. But he's never understood.

*It's so hard to remember what happened exactly
As I'm staring at the finish line*

Sherlock did not delete it as much as lose it, like relics go lost under the massive foundations of the cathedral built to honour the saint.

*First came fire then came light
Then came feeling then came sight²²*

But it doesn't really matter, because in the presence of death, he finally feels, and sees.

Nous aussi nous sentons en nous des forces inconscientes, qui veulent tout le contraire de ce que notre intelligence réclame. (...) Est-il bon que cette intelligence, qui pour l'ordinaire, après avoir fait le tour d'elle-même, ne sait plus où aller, est-il bon qu'elle rejoigne ces forces et y ajoute son poids inattendu?

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

²² Lyrics from Lou Reed's *Finish Line*, in the *Set the Twilight Reeling* album (1996).

Cairo, Egypt

Tomb raiding, stolen artifacts sold to retailers catering to unscrupulous tourists... How boring.

For months on end he won't even think of sex. Then he will masturbate twice or thrice a day for a week, breathless and painful, like a punishment.

Hong Kong, China

The Fragrant Harbour is not so fragrant anymore, not with spices, not with opium. Sherlock feels stifled by the sheer press of the crowd, unrelieved even by the large parks scattered throughout the city. A track which seemed to link some of Moran's business to a money-laundering network here turns out to be faked. Sherlock is happy to leave.

Sherlock dreams. He dreams that a Chinaman tries (and by sheer luck fails) to kidnap baby Mycroft. The Chinaman tries again the following night, but Sherlock is ready. He jumps at the Chinaman, tries to choke him to unconsciousness and bring him to his parents so they can call the police. After a frantic fight, he succeeds. He drags the heavy, limp body to the next room. His father won't even raise his eyes from the papers he's studying. His mother (young, her curly hair in a soft bun, so beautiful) is upset. She won't believe that it wasn't Sherlock who had closed Mycroft in the toolshed; she won't believe that now Sherlock has caught the culprit. She'd rather stick to her imaginary, *dull* explanation of sibling rivalry that see the exciting truth. In a dream Sherlock has caught his first criminal, and nobody believes him.

La nature, dira-t-on, c'est un mot dont nous couvrons l'inconnaissable, et peu de faits décisifs autorisent à lui attribuer un but ou une intelligence.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Tallinn, Estonia

Qalaven, Kolyvan, Lyndanisse, Kesoniemi, Rääveli, Reval, Rafala, the city of the archangel Raphaël; finally Tallinn, The City of Stables. Sherlock detects a small-time organisation exploiting children as cheap workforce for petty crime in the Old Town. There is not much that he can do locally, but he makes sure that any internationally relevant information is funneled to NSY. (Lestrade's mail address seems to be still working. Sherlock takes it as a good sign).

Sherlock sniffs at the dark green scent of ivy climbing ancient walls in the city center, remembering the base note in Regent Park's summer honey.

Est-ce nous qui nous trompons en croyant voir des précautions là où il n'y a peut-être qu'un hasard fortuné qui survit à un million de hasards malheureux?

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Helsinki, Finland

One of Sherlock's mailing addresses brings Moran's network on his tracks; he's lucky that they don't identify him for who he is. Sherlock starts on a complicated tour, trying to lose his pursuers.

There are things about Sherlock's childhood that Sherlock thought forgotten. But they aren't. Some toys of Mycroft's which were passed on to him. The taste of squashed bananas with lemon and sugar. The little blue bird Sherlock insisted had nested in the ruffle of the *plumeti* curtains in the nursery... Or perhaps the ruffle *had been* a little blue bird?

Kyoto, Japan

Still on the run, a gas leak almost kills him in his rented room.

Then there was the time after cocaine, after rehab (the second), when Sherlock was on antidepressants for a few months. He hated it. The drugs changed his personal scent in the same way they changed the contours of things. Everything a little bit drabber, a little bit narrower, more shallow, soft at the edges. Even grief.

Nous pourrions descendre plus bas encore, montrer comme l'a fait Ruskin, dans ses Ethics of the Dust, les habitudes, le caractère et les ruses des cristaux, leurs querelles, ce qu'ils font quand un corps étranger vient troubler leurs plans, qui sont plus anciens que tout ce que notre imagination peut concevoir (...) la lutte tantôt effroyable, tantôt magnifique du cristal de roche avec le fer.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Cleveland, Ohio

Sherlock fakes drowning in Lake Erie. He almost drowns for real, but the killer on his tracks reports mission accomplished.

Sherlock used to feel he could do anything. Even when he was clean (after rehab --the third, after Montague Street, after... after John came), he had felt confident, almost invulnerable. You're fearless if you don't really care whether you live or die. But now... now that he's been dead two years, five months, three weeks and one day, at every step he takes he wonders whether he's going to make it. Any moment his biological status could align with his anagraphical one. A gap in reality would close in silence. Nobody would be the wiser.

Kalafasia, Solomon Islands

Another dead end. Sherlock knows he needs rest desperately, so he stops here two days and tries to catch some sleep. He fails.

Sherlock sits on the beach and looks out on the ocean. The small waves coming to break on the sand come from 8500 miles away. He's covered more than twice the distance since he fell. It makes him feel strangely small.

Il nous est impossible de connaître si une espèce a survécu malgré les soins dangereux de la volonté supérieure, indépendamment de ceux-ci, ou enfin grâce à eux seuls.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Medellin, Colombia

Sherlock infiltrates one remaining branch of the Medellin Cartel, trafficking unobtrusively in freebase cocaine.

The hem of his trousers filled with 5 gr bags, he bites his arm until he bleeds to resist the temptation. It is a surprising discovery, how much he cares for staying alive (and sane) after all. And going home. As soon as possible.

*And in the morning light I'll remember
As the sun will rise
We are all the glowing embers
Of a distant fire*
-- ALICIA LEMKE, *Trip the Light*

Barcelona, Catalunya

Here, Moran is personally managing a ring of prostitution. Not the hardest crime to stop temporarily, but among the hardest to eradicate. Time after time, Sherlock realises that for however large Moriarty's empire was and still is, it only covers a fraction of criminal activities on a global scale. The best he can hope to do is burn out one network, fully knowing that another will spring up in its place.

"Caring is not an advantage, ...Sherlock." At the time, he missed one obvious fact. Mycroft said that --the last time they talked--because, whatever the price, he cared.

...qui nous apprendra combien d'autres, que nous n'avons pas connues, sont tombées victimes de son intelligence oublieuse ou inquiète?
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Manchester, England

Sherlock never gets here. His current quarry changes plans, changes planes, flies East instead.

What if? What if Moriarty lied. What if John, and Mrs. Hudson, and Lestrade, are already dead. Shot. Poisoned. Run over by a lorry. Drowned or electrocuted, infected with sickness or simply disappeared. Sherlock tries to keep in touch with British news; he is also fully aware that he can't get all the information he needs. Nobody knows how to contact him anywhere. Nobody knows he's still somewhere to be contacted at all.

Karachi, Pakistan

Jinnah airport. 38°C on the ground. Sherlock takes pictures of employees opening luggage and stealing valuables and sends them on to the Airport Security Force.

There are people, like James Moriarty, who want to be powerful through control over death-- who, when and how. They are afraid to die, so they kill. Even suicide can be a form of control. There are people, like John H. Watson, who gather and use all their power to fight against death. They keep blood and guts in, lungs breathing, and hearts beating as long and as efficiently as possible. Sometimes, they shoot dead Death himself. There are people who know that ultimately death cannot be controlled. These people know it's useless to fight it. They protect life instead. In that, they are powerful.

... le fluide extraordinaire qu'on nomme la vie, qui nous anime en même temps que tout le reste, et qui est cela même qui produit nos pensées qui le jugent et notre petite voix qui s'efforce d'en parler.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Prague, Czekoslovakia

A pick-pocketing organisation is flourishing, after defeating competition thanks to Moriarty's suggestions. Sherlock finds evidence against four of the major recruitment officers. The main contact with Moran escapes.

Sherlock remembers listening to the *Bacchanal* from *Samson and Delilah* by Camille Saint-Saëns, played four-hand on the mechanical pipe organ in St. Laurens' church in Rotterdam on a February evening.²³ The church was empty. He was thirteen. The music filled him, shook him, impaled him on sheer power, by turns brutal and delicate. He walked down the nave, but the music followed him. He hid behind the last pillar, pressing his back to the chilly marble, and he closed his eyes and prayed in vain for it to stop but still the notes wrapped around him, overwhelming him with a vibration starting low in his back and sweeping up like a tidal wave along his spine. He came then for the first time in his life.

Zurich, Switzerland

From Zurich, Sherlock drives, then hikes to the Reichenbach Falls. He takes the day out as a holiday, but the sight of the mass of water falling (although choked by the hydroelectrical plant) fills him with unexpected dread. He seems to always be working the hardest at learning something new about himself in those places and situations where other people go to have fun.

Sherlock had been used to being alone when he gave the heart of himself. He wouldn't have known what to do, had anyone been watching. Before John, there had been only the music which could make him give himself up like this, letting go of his diaphragm, heart and lungs riding the wave of sound. Only he and his violin, late at night, in the dark, alone. Now that he's alone again, Sherlock discovers that he has gotten used to being seen; to John's eyes on him, on his hand on the bow, on the *music*. It felt like eden, and now he's lost it, and it feels like it's his own fault.

²³ <http://orgels-en-kerken.nl/index/rotterdam-laurens-hoofd.htm>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72MdsGvwQ-U> (played in Bratislava on a different pipe organ).

It's been years since there was someone whose forgiveness Sherlock would want, or accept if offered. As he watches the Falls --what's left of them-- he thinks that he would like to ask John's forgiveness. He fully means to. If he will live long enough.

Il est probable que si elle avait employé à assurer la vie, à atténuer la souffrance, à adoucir la mort, à écarter les hasards affreux, la moitié du génie qu'elle prodigue autour de la fécondation croisée et de quelques autres désirs arbitraires, l'univers nous eût offert une énigme moins incompréhensible, moins pitoyable que celle que nous tâchons de pénétrer.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Rome, Italy

This is a place where power is wielded. Not political power, which is more and more a façade, but financial power on a European scale; global, if you factor in the Church. Even Moriarty seems barely relevant to the game played here.

Sherlock has never got the point of talking in an emergency. Such idle chat may have a place, if a dull one, when things are relaxed and leisurely. When they're not... "Shut up and swim", his Grandma Holmes used to say.

San José, Costa Rica

A high HDI and even higher EPI,²⁴ no army, the oldest established democracy in Latin America, no terrorism and a ban on recreational hunting. But mankind is the same as everywhere else. Sherlock follows the thread leading to a network stealing and recycling passports, indirectly managed by Moran.

It's always been a problem for Sherlock, stopping himself from just taking hold of what he needs or wants. He was quite puzzled at seven, when his astonished mother found a classmate's eraser in his bag of pencils and called him a thief. He needed that eraser, *wanted* it, and surely that was not stealing...?

He has learned to keep a hold on himself. But (and it's no paradox) he can't stand his own things being touched by anybody. John had no idea of what he was getting into when he began sharing sitting room and kitchen space with Sherlock. It's amazing that none of Sherlock's buttons was ever pressed. Or perhaps at the start they were like a badger and a fox sharing the same hole in the peaceful, if precarious, truce of home.

Je n'exagère pas cette surprenante et folle prodigalité de la nature.

-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Milan, Italy

Sherlock spends a day and a half here, on his way to Israel. He fights insomnia for thirteen hours, then at 2 am he goes out and walks the city in the eerie orange light of the streetlamps. At seven he finds himself in Piazza Duomo and steps into the still deserted cathedral. It is not anything like Westminster Abbey, with its mad upward acceleration; but gothic architecture anywhere never fails to give him a rush of sheer happiness, like watching a horse buck in a paddock.

Mycroft has painstakingly gathered from various sources --some legitimate, some not-- a rather exhaustive sequential account of what happened at Baskerville. He's often thought that, if one looks at Sherlock as though he was a horse, his behaviour makes perfect sense. Not human sense, though. Baskerville is a case in point.

What he sees daily on his job has given Mycroft a belated, but true appreciation of Kipling. Old Rudyard knew that few of us can keep their head in a crisis, especially an unexpected one. The fact is, Sherlock's crises are not necessarily the same as those of the rest of the (human) world. When he panics, it can happen at the very moment when others are relaxing; e.g. in front of a fireside in a cosy inn. It is at those moments that he needs comfort; *his* type of

²⁴ HDI: Human Development Index; EPI: Environmental Performance Index. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Development_Index and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_Performance_Index.

comfort. John didn't give it; he honestly thought that the situation didn't warrant it. He overlooked key clues. A rabbit, a hound, and a friend who wasn't there when it counted. He instead unintentionally compounded Sherlock's distress, only to have it mirrored back to him in the form of hallucinations in the lab. It took John a while --much too long-- to get the full meaning of "...I have just one".

*Well they said you was high classed
Well, that was just a lie.
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog,
Cryin' all the time.
Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit
And you ain't no friend of mine.²⁵*

Rafah, Gaza Strip

Smuggling of weapons, smuggling of medicines and medical equipment. Sherlock finds guerrilla is as dull as war, whatever the motivations.

By the time he was five and a half and was sent to school, Sherlock discovered that between apathy and frenzy lives cold anger.

Anger at what?

By what he already knew of the universe, it appeared to him as a thoughtless machine of destruction. What he learned later only strengthened his conviction. On one hand, a huge investment in energy and matter, living or otherwise. On the other, blind waste. On a small scale, unfit mutations, random deaths, oversights, missed clues. On a large one, inevitable, wholesale destruction.

He hates that human brains are designed to function without burning out at a mere fraction of their hypothetical computing power.

He hates DNA redundancy, untidy surplus copies clogging the neat order of the double helix.

He hates recognizing his parents in himself-- all those genes making him feel like he's a mosaic of bits and pieces belonging to someone else: a mere optical illusion, a *pointilliste* painting.

He hates that he carries the name of his paternal grandfather; a second-hand name, already used, frayed at the edges.

He hates himself.

But still he wants to live (most days), and he can't live fighting himself all the time, so he had to find someone else to fight. If what he fights are criminals, he's marginally more likely to be left in relative peace by the others.

Malgré son impatience, elle choisit son jour et son heure (...)
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Taoyuan City, Taiwan

A handful of corporations in Taiwan had hired Moriarty's services in order to forge certificates of compliance with anti-pollution procedures. It is easy for Sherlock to backtrack to Moriarty's (now Moran's) contact and collect evidence enough for him to be convicted.

There should be probably some thought about John.

But no, there is nothing.

Sherlock is getting good at avoiding thinking about John.

He has no means to know for sure, but he assumes John is not dead, and he's coping.

Somehow. (Thinking that, and then stopping, is the only way for Sherlock himself to cope).

So he assumes John is still there, every single bit of his past and present life ready and answering to the rollcall. None have gone lost and none have lost their meaning or their value.

The 743th time Sherlock is thinking this, it's 7:10 in London. John wakes up at the sound of the alarm. Turns it off. Rolls over. Reminds himself that it's a Wednesday, that he's due at the

²⁵ Lyrics from *Hound Dog* by Elvis Presley (1956). The first still (of a Rhodesian Ridgeback) from a vid of the song at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXIulKIgGpg> is briefly shown in the Mind Palace scene in THoB.

practice in two hours, that he's having a pint with Greg in the evening. That he's running out of milk, and toothpaste, and beans. That he's 42 today. Still alive. It's just that John doesn't see the point anymore.

Port of Spain, Trinidad

Sherlock investigates corruption by building contractors for the redevelopment of the eastern area of the city. It turns out that there is no link with Moriarty's network. All the same, the Rio Claro Police Station in Guayaguayare Road receives an email detailing evidence against the perpetrators. By then, Sherlock is already on the 8:45 UA 1459 flight to Miami.

Sherlock looks at his own face in a cracked mirror. The eyebrows are angry, the eyes are sad. He presses his hand horizontally to cover them. What's left to be seen is his mother's mouth. He retires his hand and wipes the glass clean from fingerprints. Then he turns off the light and shuts the door.

...elle part comme un trait au zénith de l'azur. Elle gagne ainsi des hauteurs et une zone lumineuse que les autres abeilles n'affrontent à aucune époque de leur vie.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Sherlock disguises himself as a janitor at MIT in order to access the draft of a research paper on exposure-resilient cryptography, which he needs in order to safely send information about yet another drug trafficking ring in the Boston area.²⁶ The irony does not escape him that he's practically acting out a scene from *Will Hunting*.²⁷

In Sherlock's eyes, Mycroft has always been practically perfect. As far as Sherlock knows, he may have just dispensed with all the messy business of parturition and suddenly appeared at Mummy's breast, suckling with delicate intensity.

Sherlock can't stand Mycroft doing things better than he does them himself. That's why he invented his own profession, which he's the only one to practise.

Moscow, Russia

Cook in a French restaurant. He can easily pass for French himself, and his habit of warming the pan before broiling champignons, reusing the excess water in the sauce as a last touch, gives him quite a reputation. He rather hates the idea of using poison (such a dull use for brilliant chemistry), but he's alone against one of the most powerful criminal organisations in the world: he must use every advantage if he wants to go home. (He does, very much). The Bratva boss he poisons with *Amanita phalloides* (an affiliate of Moran's) was vocal that evening in his appreciation of the new cook's *Champignons à la crème*.²⁸

Fact 1: Sherlock is used to feeling utterly different and much more valuable than normal human beings.

Fact 2: he is equally used to feeling worthless.

The two facts should be contradictory, but in Sherlock's emotional realm (a clean, empty desert of carefully arranged, perfectly windblown dunes) the actual contradiction is between "utterly different=worthless" vs. "more important".

The question is, Sherlock knows for sure that he is very good at what he does, staring at things --and people-- in their naked reality. He also feels what he does is very important. On the other hand, he must acknowledge that other people see it as worthless, or worse, unworthy.

Sherlock watches humans interact like an astronomer watches the sky. There is no sense in judging galaxies for colliding, or in inventing euphemisms for a nova explosion. Everything in

²⁶ <http://groups.csail.mit.edu/cis/cis-exposure.html>

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Will_Hunting

²⁸ <http://www.cuisineaz.com/recettes/champignons-a-la-creme-5315.aspx>

the skies is open to observation; there are no secrets, no lies, no "don't stare" rules, no things relegated to privacy.
Not so in the society of humans.

Il voudrait savoir si le moment n'est pas venu de soumettre à un examen plus judicieux ses principes, ses certitudes et ses rêves.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

San Diego, California

The list of Sherlock's assumed names lengthens. He can disguise his personal features quite effectively, but not so his bone structure. To his chagrin, Sherlock can only tap for his aliases into a specific area of onomastics without raising surprise.

Since he began school, Sherlock has been caught between his own relatively unbiased appreciation of himself as a good observer, and the quite obviously biased condemnation of others who felt their safety blanket of conventions torn to shreds by his every word, and couldn't even see the point of it.

The result has been isolation, compounded by the nagging doubt that he may actually be the only one in the world able to do what he does, and to recognize its importance. From such isolation stems his utter fascination with both Moriarty and Adler. Lestrade and John are effective palliatives in their own way, and each of them opened a whole new area of life Sherlock wasn't previously able or willing to enter; but neither can assuage the primary need to find his match.

It had been easier for him to identify with Adler. In their very first encounter she stripped herself deliberately and almost completely of social conventions, a bold epistemological statement if ever there was one. In a very deep sense, she is Sherlock's colleague, and another specimen of an endangered species. As such (and not as a friend, which she isn't) she had a right to Sherlock's protection.

Baltimore, Maryland

Taxi driver. Whitewasher. Pest control workman. Stand-in postman. Alarm system installer. Barman. Crown cap inspector in a mineral water bottling plant. Sherlock's trip across the States gives him a totally new, hands-on perspective on how so-called normal people live.

Moriarty was quite another matter. For one thing, Sherlock does have a moral compass of his own --although it responds to a different magnetic pole than most people's-- and its efficiency has been boosted since John came along. For another, Moriarty himself switched purposefully between "we're the same, two versions of the same person" and "we're different/you're soft/you're on the wrong side". He knew such switching destabilised Sherlock very effectively. When Sherlock said he may be on the side of angels, but not one of them, he was declaring that he chose to be different from Moriarty, whatever they may have in common, and even if what they had in common (their starkly naked way of looking at people and the world) was what each of them most valued.

Plus il accorde de force aux lois qui semblent proposer l'exemple de l'égoïsme; de l'injustice et de la cruauté, plus, du même coup, il en apporte aux autres qui conseillent la générosité, la pitié, la justice, car dès l'instant qu'il commence d'égaliser et de proportionner plus méthodiquement les parts qu'il fait à l'univers et à lui-même, il trouve à ces dernières lois quelque chose d'aussi profondément naturel qu'aux premières, puisqu'elles sont inscrites aussi profondément en lui que les autres le sont dans tout ce qui l'entoure.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Denver, Colorado

Sherlock agrees to stay after hours, unloading crates in the warehouse where he's been hired as forklift driver. He knows that in one of the crates there is a small bundle of saran wrap, and that in the bundle of saran wrap is a smuggled stone artifact, a white marble idol from the Cyclads. He opens the crate and unloads by hand box after box of self-tapping screws. His hands shake with the

unaccustomed effort as he reaches down for the wrap and the sightless blank face of the idol in his plastic shroud.

Pain. Physical pain is grounding. It makes him slow down and process one thing at a time when the stress of multitasking is getting too much to handle after almost three years of ceaseless battle.

When his back is lanced suddenly by a blade of horizontal pain as he bends to reach under his bed for his travel bag, he squeezes his eyes shut *breathless wordless thankful*.

Piter, Russia

The man he kills here is (for complicated reasons) barefoot. He checks the absence of vital signs in the body stretched belly-up on the wet tiled floor. The feet stick up, relaxed. John has beautifully rounded feet, a perfect headrest on rainy evenings when John tapped at his laptop in bed and Sherlock listened, staring at the ceiling, until he fell blessedly asleep.

Since the beginning, it had been Sherlock who looked up at John without even realising, Sherlock who mimicked John's attitudes (standing, crossing arms), not the reverse. Sherlock, who always wants things his own way and orders people about, mimicked a quiet, retired army doctor who doesn't issue orders... unless pulling rank at Baskerville.

Even now, three years and more than one thousand three hundred miles apart, Sherlock feels the pull of John's gravity, like a horseman's hand quietly working an exuberant horse on the longe, like a small compact star holding its larger, brighter companion fast to its orbit, like a falconer calling the hawk back to his glove, until all Sherlock wants is to surrender and merge and become one.²⁹

Trop de circonstances nous demeurent inconnues.
-- MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *La vie des abeilles*

Seattle, Washington

His work is done. He can fly home.

In the end, nothing really matters anymore. He feels light like the smoke of a pipe.

*All darkness on your hand
I'm hooded, pinned and held by you
O, give me back my wings
That they may bring me back to you.*
-- JONATHAN STEFFENS, *The Falcon to the Falconer*.

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3. Life as it will be

It's the evening of November 2nd, the day of the dead, when Sherlock returns. A western wind is blowing in small gusts, raising bits of rubbish to tumble along Baker Street and chilling Dr. John H. Watson at the crossing of Melcombe Street as he makes his way home from the tube station.

There is a man-shaped shadow at the door. Correction: there is a Sherlock-shaped shadow at the door. John blinks. The shadow is still there. John's heart is stout, but it skips a beat, then another, then restarts with a leap. His legs feel heavy, yet his steps are light. He stops in front

²⁹ About contact binary star systems see:

http://www.daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/C/contact_binary.html

<http://www.celestialmatters.org/?q=node/134>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W_Ursae_Majoris

of the two ochre-coloured steps, the upper one worn in the middle. He looks up to meet a pair of frightened grey eyes.

"Why didn't you go in?"

"No keys."

"It never stopped you before."

"I didn't know if you still wanted me. After."

"I didn't either." John's voice cracks like glass, but stays together. "Now I do. Come on in,"

John says, and without touching Sherlock, without even brushing his black leather jacket, his faded jeans, his damp, muddy canvas sneakers, he steps up and opens the door.

John is still wearing one sock and nothing else when he presses his fingertips to Sherlock's bare chest, tipping him back to lie on the stripped mattress of a room which has remained empty for three years. The contact is hard and chilly.

Sherlock stretches with his arms spread and his legs folded. Anchored, grounded, defined. He feels like he could float away without such boundaries as the cool mattress, the sharp angle of his femurs and tibias, the pull of muscle in his shoulders, the weight of the orderly row of his vertebrae inside the length of his torso.

And finally John speaks.

"Let go," he says, his voice still cold. And then, softly, "Allow me."

"Anything." Sherlock's voice is no more than a breath. "Anything you want."

John gently stretches first one of Sherlock's legs, then the other. The lumbar vertebrae curve into a slightly deeper arch, sparking a shiver that runs upwards to Sherlock's nape.

John begins to slowly stroke Sherlock's flanks and waist with one hand while holding the other on his belly, now warm and heavy like a security blanket.

"This," John murmurs.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"I've wanted to tell you I'm sorry for so long."

"Hm?"

"I didn't know if I could do it."

"It's done. You did it. It's all right now."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

Then there is blood. There are tears. There are broken breaths on eyes, on mouth. One bites at the other's belly, feeling the muscles contract in pain. One grabs the other's hair at the nape and holds throughout their climax.

"Thank you," Sherlock says, after.

"I love you."

"I believe I have loved you for a long time."

"I know."

"How? I didn't."

"I know that too. It doesn't matter now."

"I don't remember anymore who I am."

"Who are you?"

"Someone else."

"Yes and no."

"...Still not normal."

"Never normal."

"Is it okay?"

"It's what I want."

Years later, Sherlock will cherish the sparse white hairs among the golden ones on John's groin.

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