

Mudita. A chance meeting

by mazaher and athens7

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Heartfelt thanks to tweedisgood for exhaustive information about railway service between Dover and London in 1900. Any remaining mistakes are the authors'.

For Mudita, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mudita>. It is opposite to envy as well as to Schadenfreude (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schadenfreude>).

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Sherlock Holmes, Baskerville Old Face (rather inevitably)

Dr. John Watson, Arial

Dr. Jack Waszowski, Cambria

Patrick Moriarty, Verdana

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1. Holmes, Paris to Calais

by mazaher

As I set myself to record the Strange Incident of The 9:15 From Dover, I realise that the emotions it caused are far from extinguished, even after more than ten years. The human machine is indeed a marvel, and it doesn't cease surprising me with its biochemical combinations. A violin and a piano both draw sound from the vibration of strings, but it is impossible that a violin's gut threads, caressed by a horsehair bow, will ever produce the same sounds as a piano's steel wires, percussed by a felt-covered wooden hammer. Yet, what a variety of voices can a violin produce! What a treasure of mimicry in front of the myriad sounds of bustling life! A violin can weep like a woman, shout like an angry man, screech like a cat in love, ring like a handbell and rumble like distant thunder. In the very same way, I find that I can, after all, when the strings are touched in a certain way, produce the sounds of emotion...

But I digress. Let's turn to facts, the hard, neat, clean sustenance of intellect, leaving aside the changing hues of sentiment.

December 3rd, 1900.

It was raining on Paris when we boarded our compartment at Gare du Nord, on the 11:25 to Calais. Temperature 5°C, low cover of clouds, a few snowflakes drowned among the steady drops.¹

Watson and I were still riding the last tired ripples of the wave of excitement from our adventure on the Friesland, followed by a sombre reckoning less than 24 hours before, when we had been among the few mourners at the funeral of Oscar Wilde. Now exhaustion weighed on me with almost nightmarish heaviness. Whenever I closed my eyelids I would alternately see the sweep of the horrible, leathery wings of the improbable beast,² or the light of the clear, gray, innocent eyes which

¹ Historical information about the weather, gleaned from <http://www.london-weather.eu/article.36.html>, corroborates Holmes' record.

² William Baring-Gould reports Ray Kierman's observation (in *A Shocking Affair*, «The Baker Street Journal», 2, 4, 1952) that *Friesland* is the name of the ship reported as having sighted the escaped pterodactylus in Conan Doyle's (bowdlerised) account of the expedition to what he whimsically called *The Lost World* (published 1912). Kierman further suggests that Holmes and Watson, appointed with the task of capturing the animal, were hastily conveyed on board, set the steamer to full pursuit and lured the brute to the upper deck. A fight ensued; Watson dispatched the reptile with a well-placed shot of his gun when Holmes' life was in danger. See WILLIAM BARING-GOULD, *The annotated Sherlock Holmes*, vol. 2, New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1967, p. 415, note 3.

had met mine for the first time at the Avondale Club one windy afternoon in early March, 1895.³ Now both those bright lives were extinct, and I couldn't shake myself out of grief. At least the winged monster had been spared the posthumous insult of mediocre occasional verses, penned in haste by someone who used the word "poet" as though it was the name of a trade.⁴

Unable to sleep among such contrasting impressions and reflections, I watched my Watson. He was also very tired, the satisfaction of having saved my life (yet again) slowly succumbing to the thin chord of worry which our domestic arrangements have inexorably drawn along the years through his mind, his heart and his belly, which had been tightened a notch (yet again) by what we had witnessed the day before, and for which I should never forgive myself... But I do, time after time, when he raises his blue eyes to mine and smiles.

He smiled to me right then, as I drew myself up when the train shuddered all over in passing over a point; then he had a small grimace of pain. His shoulder hurt, and since we'd taken our seats in Paris I'd observed him repeatedly slipping his hand under his jacket, trying to keep the aching joint warm. He'd also been using his pain-control breathing rhythm, deliberately slow and deep. But the shoulder was not his only cross at the moment. As the wintry landscape of Pas-de-Calais rushed past out of the window in a haze of steam and smoke, he stretched his bad leg in front of him, he adjusted his trouser carefully to disguise the awkwardness of the underlying limb, and I would have given anything -- anything-- to be more of a solution for this man I loved than I had ever been a problem.

But, I irreparably being what I am, there was nothing I could do. Only sit there, and not leave him alone, not again, not ever.

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2. Watson, Paris to Calais

by mazaher

The first thing I remember about that memorable evening is that we were worn out.

I know that I shouldn't speak for my companion-- he had not been giving any visible sign of being any less than his alert self, ready for anything at a moment's notice. But details here and there gave him away to me, if no-one else. As our *fiacre* reached La Gare du Nord and we stepped down and in toward our platform, he made his way through the crowd like Moses through the Red Sea. His moves were nimble as he jumped up the steps to our compartment, then turned to help me hoist myself more clumsily up. But as soon as our small baggage had been set on the nets above our heads, and the train had slipped jerkily into motion -- wheels sliding on the rails, wagons creaking, steam hissing, the huge steel body of the engine stretching and warming to the coming effort-- the inertia shed by the accelerating train seemed by degrees to fall upon him instead.

He planted his feet on the floor, knees bent, his long legs folded at an acute angle, and he leaned back on the headrest, his spine a graceful curve between occiput and tailbone. His eyes were troubled by a haze of tiredness and sadness. They fell shut every few miles, but then I saw him start awake almost at once, and I didn't delude myself into blaming the points. The risk and utter absurdity of what we had witnessed aboard the *Friesland*, and the bleakness of the ceremony in Bagneux (seventeenth section, seventh row, eleventh grave) had taken their toll on his usually unassailable constitution.

My friend, Sherlock Holmes, was exhausted.

I was myself the worse for wear. Between the exertion of the fight on the steamer, the sudden load on my arm when I had reflexively caught Douglas as he almost fell into the grave while pressing on Mr. Ross for the nearest place,⁵ and the utter unavailability in our hotel's stable of the common linseed poultice the overnight application of which would have eased my shoulder into tolerable conditions (I wonder how the carriage horses in Paris manage under such indifferent care), I was badly put indeed, and as soon as I was seated I began feeling every one of my old aches complaining in both my upper and lower limbs.

³ Holmes and Watson met Wilde briefly during their investigation of what Watson *in pectore* called *The West End Horror*. Watson's report of the case was kept private, and only published a full 80 years later, after having been rediscovered in unusual circumstances and committed to the hands of Nicholas Meyer, who edited it for printing (London: Book Club Associates, 1976).

⁴ Holmes is making reference to Alfred Douglas' poem *The Dead Poet*, written in 1900 and published the following year (read at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-dead-poet/>).

⁵ An undocumented elaboration by Watson on events independently mentioned by RICHARD ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, London: Hamilton, 1987; Penguin Books, 1988, p. 550.

What could I do? I set myself as comfortably as I could, I checked that Holmes seemed warm enough in his coat, and I tried to be there with a smile whenever he raised his eyes to mine. There was nothing else within my scope at the moment. Even the small kindnesses that an old married couple is allowed in public are anathema and a deadly danger for such men as we are. But soon enough we would be home.

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3. Waszowski, Calais to Dover

by athens7

My head was killing me.

I can honestly say, with a reasonably high degree of certainty, that quite a narrow number of experiences in my life have been more excruciating than that brief, and yet seemingly unending, train trip to Calais. To say nothing of those fifteen minutes we had to spend on the docks, frosted wind biting our legs and whipping our face, the tepid sun of Italian winter a memory inexorably fading in the landscape of marching time. While contemplating my breath leaving my chapped mouth in small puffs, I found it increasingly harder to believe that merely a week earlier I had been strolling leisurely along the Tiber, with a few solitary seagulls watching over us and my mind driving itself to exhaustion in the hopeless attempt to follow Patrick's excruciatingly detailed analysis of Satie's harmonic minimalism.⁶

But my walk down the boulevard of remembrance was once again rudely interrupted by a sharp stab piercing me right behind my eye, in perfect timing with the outside world, with the sailors yelling instructions for boarding and the shrill whistle of the ferry. It took all my residual strength not to drop dead against the concrete.

I could feel Patrick's guarded, concerned eyes fixed on me, making the back of my neck tingle with a warmth he never fails to bring to my being whenever he decides to focus all of his undivided, formidable attention on me. I feel precious and unworthy, under that gaze, and every time I am sure it will be the last I am granted such mercy. It is an extremely oppressive way of thinking, at times, but I have found that it imbues those moments when yes, everything is actually good, with even more sweetness. All this high thinking, however, did not help me to answer Patrick's soft-voiced inquiries with anything that went beyond a petulant mumble or an annoyed grunt.

As soon as I could, I boarded and headed straight towards the public lounges, bracing myself for yet another two hours of torment. Before I could even begin to search a seat, though, I felt Patrick delicately tugging my wrist, so that I turned to find him staring at me with his eyebrows slightly raised, his expression a most endearing mixture of amusement and incredulity.

'Really, my boy?', I could hear him say. 'Do you honestly believe that I would allow you to mingle with the common people?'

'We really need to address your snobbery, one of these days,' I whispered, following his lead.

'My little Marxist,' he retorted, adding nothing else. I deserved the mockery, for in that moment I could not but be immensely grateful for his misanthropy.

Once in the cabin, he locked the door, then sat on one of the narrow beds.

'Bitte,' he said expectantly, patting his thigh.

'Doctor's orders, I presume,' I huffed, but I obeyed just the same, of course.

As soon as my head touched his lap, his hand immediately came to rest on my brow, and in that moment it felt like the only thing preventing my face from bursting open; his long fingers tangled with my hair (*Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*, but oh, the secret pleasure it brings me, that he seems to appreciate it so much), shifting every now and then to trace my sideburns or the shell of my ear.

My eyes slid shut of their own volition. Only once I managed to open them, and the sight I found, of him above me, reading what suspiciously looked like Goethe's *Faust*, with a half-consumed cigarette hovering as if forgotten near his lips, and the weak sunlight from outside painting his eyes even more

⁶ Eric Satie (1866-1925), composer, pianist, Rosicrucian, dadaist (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Satie). Listen to his *Trois Gymnopédies* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7DBoiyBoJ8>

blue than usual (if that is at all possible), was enough to lodge a lump in my throat, and to bring the flavour of tears on my tongue.

In my half-dazed state, I could not stop myself from thinking that salty tang must be what pure, unadulterated happiness would taste like, were an expert chemist to try and synthesize the feeling in an artificial compound.

Never stop making me feel like this, I thought, or maybe I uttered it, because his hand stilled for a moment, and then his lips touched mine, so briefly and intensely that I am still not sure if it actually happened, or if it was merely the product of my knackered mind.

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4. Moriarty, Calais to Dover

by athens7

He fell asleep, at last. And he has the gall to say that *I* am a cat.

But I suppose I cannot really blame him for it. Being the flawless embodiment of everything a good doctor should be, he abhors being taken care of, just as much as he needs to take care of others.

Even if it took me years to accept it (and I will never, ever, admit it openly to him), I understand. In fact, these rare moments, where he grants me the privilege to glimpse the pride and the fierce independence that he usually keeps so carefully hidden beneath the layers of joviality, only add to that bottomless list of reasons which allow him to maintain such a firm grasp on my heart.

As the minutes passed by and turned into a full hour, my interest for Faust's trials and tribulations gradually lost its strength. My eyes seemed more and more incapable to resist the pull of attraction exerted by his lean form, all sharp lines and acute angles. I couldn't suppress a smile at the sight he made, sprawled like a discarded coat on the bed, with his long, lanky legs bent most awkwardly in the desperate attempt to fit in the confined space. That n-th reminder that he is just that much taller should have bothered me, as it sometimes (and irrationally, I hear him add) does, but in that moment, I really could not bring myself to care. Finally, I yielded to temptation (that being the only way to get rid of one, a wise man once said, if my memory doesn't fail me), and took his hand in mine, engaging in a thorough study of it; the fact that it was a revision of a lesson already learned a thousand times did not in any way lessen the pleasure it brought me. Once again, I observed how smooth and squared his fingers tend to be, except for the third finger, whose tip is slightly more tapered, almost conical. I traced his beautiful, strong wrist, noting how the ridge of his radiocarpal joint is much more prominent than mine, a mound embedded in his skin like a cornerstone of his whole being. I debated at length with myself on the infinite differences between the shades of our epidermis: being children of Albion (well, at least faithful residents), we are both very pale, but whereas I tend towards a weak pink, he always remains untainted like polished marble. I chased the hair on the back of his hand (much thicker than mine), until it disappeared under the sleeve of his dark grey travel jacket, and I had to surrender. My analysis was brought to an end by his voice, low and soft and slightly muffled by sleep and the fabric of my trousers. "We should have attended, do you think?" he asked.

Ay, there's the rub. What was I saying about him being the best doctor on earth?

There was no need for him to specify what function he was referring to, of course. The reminder had always been there with us, simmering quietly in the background of our minds for the entire week, becoming almost impossible to ignore while crossing France.

"No," I sighed, and I meant it.

"It could easily have been one of us", he replied after a small pause.

"I really don't think it could have, you know."

I heard him swallow, painfully.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," I growled, and my grip on him tightened, out of my control.

He propped himself on his elbows, looking at some point over my shoulder, his mouth opening and then closing uselessly. He exhaled heavily, hiding his face against my shoulder.

Just then, the whistle signaled our imminent arrival to Dover.

"Come on," I murmured, patting his shoulder and standing to gather our possessions.

But as I started heading towards the door, he grabbed me by the collar and pushed me against the wall. Immediately my temper flared in automatic response, my lips parting to deliver some scathing comment (mechanisms of self-preservation born of years, decades even, of practice, are not so easily repressed, after all), but then I finally looked into his obsidian eyes, and the words got stuck in my throat. Because I know that gaze, so very well, despite the fact that I can count the number of times I witnessed it on the fingers of one hand: I saw it for the first time in an empty house in Dublin, when we were twenty (and therefore, stupid) and were attempting to sterilize our own hearts; and I encountered it again on the edge of a purgatorial waterfall, at the turn of the century. In both occasions I had been too blind and frightened and prisoner of myself to acknowledge it, but oh, is it not funny how things can change?

It's a gaze that says only one thing, more powerful than any plea, and that holds the meaning of life itself: '*Stay safe*'.

I leaned into him, until our foreheads touched and I could breathe his breath.

"I am here," I whispered.

He nodded, and I heard the shackles once again falling broken at our feet.

"Yes," he answered, and he kissed me and kissed me and kissed me.

"Shall we go home?" he said, after we finally parted.

I smiled, and opened the door.

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5. Holmes, Calais to Dover

by mazaher

"You really should think about quitting, Holmes," I heard Watson say, "the Americans may be on to something about it possibly causing..." his voice faltered. "...unpleasant effects."

Not even tiredness slows him down when it's a matter of my physical health and well-being. So much he cares, that he can't even bring himself to utter the ominous words, lung cancer.⁷

I had been absent-mindedly enjoying a cigarette in the thankfully empty first-class smoking lounge on the Pas-de-Calais.⁸ The sea was rolling under a south-western wind in long waves, and more passengers than usual had fled to the privacy of the cabins.

I had been vaguely thinking of two of them in particular: younger men both, and unusually handsome by any standard. They had walked up the first class boarding bridge together, the one in front slightly taller, dark-haired, broad-shouldered, confidently making way for his companion. The latter was lean and fair, nervous but self-possessed, with long fine pianist's hands. It had been a mere glimpse; they had disappeared through the crowd in the direction of the cabins. But now I was finding myself wishing for more details, clues to who they were, where they were coming from...

If they were together.

Watson's remark brought me to myself again-- to the rain pattering on the thick glass of the portholes, to the aroma of tobacco permeating the upholstery, to the soft voice of my friend, worrying about me.

"My dear Watson, it is quite unlikely that my smoking habit will be the end of me. That particular event is liable to come by earlier, and by swifter means, than the rare illness you won't mention.

Moreover, I have been for long time abiding ...mostly, by your wishes in the matter of another, allegedly noxious habit of mine; you can't, I am sure, demand more from me."

He sighed. I am his cross, when I'd give anything to be his solace. Each of his sighs is a mark of sin on my lost soul.

⁷ Discussion of possible health hazards from smoking had been raised as early as the XVII and XVIII centuries (e.g. by James VI of Scotland, James I of England, author in 1604 of *A counterblaste to tobacco*, and in America by Benjamin Rush, a physician and one of the Founding Fathers, 1745-1813). It was again an American, Dr. Isaac Adler, that in 1912 explicitly linked smoking to the then uncommon illness of lung cancer.

⁸ Holmes' memory seems to be faulty on the name of the steamer: the *Pas-de-Calais* and its twin *Le Nord* were in service on the morning crossings, the midday and night ones being done by British ships. See the record at the *Paddle Steamer Picture Gallery*, <http://freespace.virgin.net/jack.lee2000/nordimg.htm>.

“I wish I could demand of you that you live a long and healthy life.”

“You knew from the beginning that a long life has never been my aim, and health is one only inasmuch as it serves my work.”

“In the beginning...” he started forcefully, “...things were different. Or so I thought,” he ended lamely. I watched him through the blue curls of smoke. As I said, the lounge was empty, the door closed, the crew busy dealing with the sea and the passengers with seasickness, the sea itself chanting its ancient song alongside the plowing hull. I kept my voice low anyway.

“Are you asking me whether I’d live for you?”

His blue eyes widened. I had offended him, again. He’s too much of a soldier, an officer, and a gentleman, to give his emotion away by any more obvious means than the expression on his open, honest face. He drew a quick breath, coming to some decision. He crossed his legs and leaned back in the wicker chair.

“Yes,” he said.

It was my turn to be taken aback. Never before had we been so explicit in touching on our commitment. Only half-words, eyes meeting, fingers grazing; only one of us at a time giving voice to what we felt. Never the both of us at the same time. I shivered, yet something made me pursue the matter, tread on where perhaps no living soul should. I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, hands joined under my chin, the cigarette guiltily burning to the stub, unsmoked, between my fingers.

“Provided the blood covenant goes both ways, I will,” I said.

The look on his face was worth the risk, and indeed I wondered why *this* was happening now; now in this deserted smoking lounge on a boat halfway across the Channel, why now in our exhaustion and melancholy, now that it was so late, and why not in one of our moments of shared triumph and mutual joy; why not ten years earlier, why not in 1881, when I met the man who would compare to none other in my life, and forever hold the key to that most metaphysically unused of my internal organs, my heart.

It didn’t matter. What we had, what we were, what we had been for such a long time, had finally found words.

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6. Watson, Calais to Dover

by athens7

To the present day, I still find myself utterly incapable of delineating the exact chain of events, the set of circumstances, that led us to what I can define without reservations as one of the most pivotal and cherished moments in the long history of our partnership. I must concede, however, that I am not doing my very utmost. The event, when it happened, caught both of us completely unawares: life-changing, and ...sacred. Just as well that we were at sea, caught between countries and societies: we were in a twilight zone, a limbo of the soul where light knew no shades and darkness was not allowed to exist. All our masks were naked; we were tired and sad, and in need for something only the other could offer.

I began conversation in a commonplace fashion, my tokens of affection masqueraded as educated concerns voiced through my pedantic Doctor persona.

The sense of worship I feel for his physique has always been one of my most jealously-guarded sources of contentment. I am painfully aware of how this reverence of mine managed to stealth its way to the pages of my writing efforts, albeit in a strongly sublimated form, just as self-inflicted injury has always been his own elected weapon of spiritual mortification. His words on that steamer are just further proof of the postulate. With the privilege of hindsight, those exchanges were after all nothing but templates for our usual standards of verbal sparring: I speak out of simple feeling, and then he methodically proceeds to demonstrate just how elementary it is for him to turn my words into mockeries of themselves, inadequate vehicles of shallow contents, flights of fancy of a well-meaning but hopelessly sentimental man, unable to acknowledge the world for the string of indisputable facts and predictable chemical reactions it really is.

That he suffer and be tormented and miserable is an edict of God, and all my protestations to the contrary are admirable, but ultimately futile.

Once again I was left wondering how could I possibly make him understand... that to serve him has never been a burden, but always – *a/ways* – a choice; that his friendship, his companionship, are not punishment, but a gift; that I, far better than he, understand quite clearly how gifts always come with a price, one that I am

willing to pay over and over again; that what my marriage proved, in the end, is that, by staying at his side, I am not sacrificing my own happiness: quite the contrary, in fact.

To find adequate means to express even a fraction of all this seems even now a doomed endeavour. And yet, I cannot help thinking that I may be as good as dead and burning in hell if, for a single moment, I let myself stop trying.

"In the beginning...", I said, and I could not force myself to finish with the words I wanted. I corrected my aim, and made a worse mess.

I closed my eyes, only for a moment: immediately on the back of my eyelids was projected the unforgettable image of a black coffin being slowly, inexorably lowered into the bowels of the earth, and the force, the improbability of us sitting there, after having gained and lost so much, after having found each other so many times, despite all the odds, pervaded my heart and defeated my mind.

He asked then, the question that must never be asked, lest it destroy us both.

But he asked, and I answered, and we were not destroyed. Or maybe we were, and then were instantly brought back by the sheer power of that vow, our flesh made new again by shadows of thoughts now given form, at last, ore true, undeniable.

His grey eyes told the entire story: my reply had caught him completely unprepared.

Beware, travelers, for you are now treading an undiscovered country, the silence hanging between us seemed to whisper. *Hic sunt leones*.

What can I say? A terrible love of danger runs deep and far in the veins of the Watson family.

But I being John Watson, and he being Sherlock Holmes, the final word is always rightfully his, and as one irrefutable condition, it must leave me breathless.

He sealed his part of the proposal, and I wanted to cry; I cannot say if out of joy or *saudade*, probably both.

That moment was worth all the wounds. It was everything, and it could never be enough.

It was too little, too late, and it was eternity.

It was us, and that was enough.

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7. Holmes, Dover to London

by mazaher

The boat finally docked at Dover under a steady, chilly drizzle. We disembarked among a crowd of mackintoshes, valises, umbrellas, wailing children and shouting porters. I barely saw, barely heard. I followed Watson to the trains, letting myself be led for once, and I felt like I walked on air-- a curious sensation, which I had last experienced in 1873, when for the first time I obtained urea from silver isocyanate and ammonium chloride.⁹ The presence of my friend, his body lively and warm beside me despite his exhaustion and nagging pains, lulled me into a comfortable relaxation like I seldom remember, unless as the fleeting effect of chemicals. We had pledged our faith, and --God forgive me-- I was so selfish as to let him bear the weight of bringing us both home.

We stepped into our compartment, which was still empty. I had meant to book it all, so as to enjoy more comfort and some privacy on the last leg of our return journey, but in vain: only two seats had been still available. We settled ourselves as best we could, next to the window opposite the door, facing each other. Sitting side by side is only allowed to married couples or --how unfair!-- to ladies traveling together. Men, even the closest of friends, are presumed to remain in a measure competitive; they are expected to always face each other like chivalrous enemies, as suspicious of each other as sporting in their dealings. Such are the ways of our times!

It was with an effort that I drew my eyes from my companion, who sighed in relief as again he stretched his leg across the narrow floor, and gazed instead at the throng milling on the platform, caught between the grey of the weather above and the puffs of steam from the engines below. My eyelids were slowly closing...

But I was brought back with a jolt to full awareness at the sight of the two young men I had noticed on the boat, now hurrying toward our train. They cut a striking figure indeed, as though a brighter light shone around them amid the grime and bustle of the station. I was again taken by the way the taller

⁹ A process perfected by Friedrich Wöhler as far back as 1828, but not so straightforward to perform in a small domestic laboratory.

one seemed to listen without impatience to his friend's complaints --about the lack of porters, I deduced-- all the while stepping between him and the mindless press of bodies around them both, making way.

They walked along the platform. They approached, reading to each other the numbers on the doors...

"Fourteen! Here it is!" cried the slender one.

"Quick, the whistle's blowing!" the other answered, grabbing the doorhandle to our compartment.

The train was creaking, puffing, slowly moving as they neatly jumped in, the taller one drawing inside after himself two pieces of baggage and setting it carefully on the floor, the other taking a stand just inside the door, a bit on the side and behind his companion.

"Good evening, gentlemen," the first one --a doctor, a Slav, an orphan, and eighteen months the older than the other--¹⁰ greeted us with a nod, as he took off his hat and effortlessly pushed a heavy suitcase on the net above the seat. "Patrick, would you hand me your bag, please? Also your hat. Thanks.

Here, out of the way with all our stuff. I wonder why they don't build these nets a bit lower... May I be allowed to introduce my friend and myself? I am Dr. Jacob Waszowski and..."

"Patrick Moriarty," the other interrupted. "How do you do?"

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8. Waszowski, Dover to London

by athens7

"I say, this is simply preposterous! Don't you suppose there is time for a brief detour to the director's office? I most certainly do!"

"Patrick, I am young and strong, a healthy representative of the species, right in the middle of the journey of our life, although not astray in a dark wood. You have no reason at all to fear that I'll fall ill with pneumonia just because I have to carry our baggage for a journey of roughly ten feet."

"You, - I, - that is hardly my point!"

"That is exactly your point. Really, I nearly think I should be insulted. Hush now, and please try to walk a little bit faster, that's a good fellow."

He carried on spluttering some more, but his outraged protestations gradually lost their edge, until they were reduced to a last, stubborn grumble, one that sounded something like, "...as soon as we are home, I am writing a letter".

It was all pro forma, of course, a reassuring pantomime we both needed after the intensity of what had just transpired between us on the steamer. And in fact, who am I fooling? Of course, it was all for my benefit. He knew that I was still feeling deeply, uncomfortably embarrassed for that rare show of weakness and need, just as I knew that all he wanted to do in that moment was to sweep me up in his arms and take me away from "all the undeserving humanity surrounding us" (his words, not mine). I resented him a little for that, because that's the way I am; and at the same time it made me love him a little more, because that's the way I am as well.

The acknowledgment of our mutual weaknesses bounced back and forth between us, as silently and smoothly as our mingled breathing a good ten minutes after love-making; so that they balanced out, allowing us to tease and needle each other without any fear to draw a drop of blood, not even by accident. Our bodies were not so much as brushing, and yet I felt like he was entirely wrapped around me, enveloping me with his presence, and at the same time opening himself up completely to let my own essence soak his marrow.

It was the headiest, softest feeling in the world, like a cat snuggling against your side after hours spent stalking your bed, and for the second time that day, I found myself praying it would never end.

We found our carriage in the exact moment when the engine groaned and the train slowly began to move. As soon as I jumped inside, the back of my neck started to tingle in a most peculiar way.

¹⁰ Correct on all accounts, except an error of about six months more or less in Holmes' estimate of ages: Jacob Waszowski was born on January 25, 1869 or 1870, while Patrick Moriarty was born on December 31, 1871. There's always something...

I tried to cast an unobtrusive glance at the two gentlemen already sitting there, and the sensation only seemed to gain intensity.

There was something almost, impossibly... familiar about them.

As Patrick never fails to demonstrate, time and again, words are quite a powerful smoke screen. So I proceeded to babble, robbing them of the chance to engage us first, and all the while searching frantically in every corner of my mind for that detail that I knew was hiding in the maze of my memories. Something trivial, something vital...

Then Patrick introduced himself, and the washed out image of a copy of «The Strand» flashed before my eyes, and my heart sank right down in my stomach.

It was going to be a long ride.

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9. Watson, Dover to London

by mazaher

There is not better tonic than happiness. I had been feeling like a dog run over by a tramway; yet as we disembarked and made our way to the trains, I felt a buoyant joy I could only remember from my Saturday nights as a student, when the prospect of a couple of pints and maybe a good catch in the female department used to be the highlight of my week after six days of toiling over books.

There is a difference, however, between the carefree cheerfulness of a twenty-year-old boy in strapping health, and what I was feeling then, as my friend --my lover-- allowed me the pride to lead the way for once. I was already getting on in years, not so healthy anymore, battered and bruised by life as it is inevitable that a man be after a half-century of war, of work, and heartbreak, and love. But I wouldn't have gone back in time, no sir, nor would I now. I wouldn't have changed the focused joy I was feeling, the solace of that certainty, for anything in the world. It has not left me yet, I have been blessed so.

I had an inkling that my companion felt the same. It is unusual for him to be led; it is unusual for him to allow his eyes to roam softly on his surroundings, rather than pierce every detail with hawk-like clarity. I did feel his tiredness, but more than that, I felt his contentment. He receives less than his fair share of it. I cherished the event, and the fact that I may have had part in its causation.

We reached our compartment. When we heard the conductor whistle for departure, I dared to hope that it may remain empty, the other bookings canceled or the bookers delayed; but it was not to be.

Just as the engine vibrated, straining to move the mass of steel, a couple of youths jumped on.

I say youths, but my judgement is swayed by my own position on the arc of life: beyond the middle then, even farther toward its sunset now. They were grown men, in the full light of their noon; there was an air of radiant energy around them, as only love can bestow... A boy's reckless love for life, or a man's thoughtful love for the one person on whom his life itself stands and turns.

I was not the only one to notice: like a blade being sheathed, Holmes' *rêverie* ended as he set his eyes on them. There was no outward sign of his interest, but I have learned in years to read his stern, handsome face. They were as fascinating to him as an unexpected footprint or an encrypted note. Little did either of us know what the contents of that note would mean for us, once decyphered.

The first to step in was tall, dark, broad-shouldered, and provided of an easy courtesy. He neatly put away both their baggages and their hats, while the other --slightly smaller, slender but strong and agile as an athlete under his rigidly formal garments, and apparently endowed with the gift of making himself invisible behind his more expansive companion-- stood waiting in the corner. Then the taller one turned to us with a smile to introduce himself. I listened to his name being spoken, but it fled from my mind at once, when... "Patrick Moriarty," the fair one introduced himself.

I saw Holmes turn even paler than his usual, his mouth firming in a thin line of alarm. On instinct, I drew back my bad leg which I had thankfully stretched, ready to stand up, my back tensing in anticipation.

But when I looked up again at the hand the young man stretched toward us, and then up his spotless waistcoat, his perfect stiff collar, his fine features and finally his dark blue eyes, what I saw was not a threat. It was the sudden shock of fear of a proud stag coming unexpectedly face-to-face with a couple of deerhounds. His friend had leaned forward to shield him, a frown on his face as if he was desperately trying to remember something, and that something was the key to the other's safety.

So I exhaled slowly, making myself heard, and leaned purposefully against the back of my seat. I was gratified that the most hidden layer, the wild mind that ticks on within every living being, picked up the signal and made the three of them relax minutely.

There would be very little I would have the chance to say and be useful in the next hour or so, but I was determined to do my damn best to smooth out any possible confrontation. It takes two to chase or fight. I definitely didn't want either to happen to my partner. But I also found myself feeling for this young man, who

seemed made to walk in grace, and was instead staring at Holmes with fright in his eyes and courage in his chin; and feeling for his companion. I know how it is, wanting to protect someone who can't always be protected. I know how he felt right then.

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10. Moriarty, Dover to London

by athens7

Jack wouldn't stop chattering.

In normal circumstances, I am immensely grateful for his willingness to take upon himself the burden of social manners. The arrangement gives him a means to express his natural propensity to camaraderie, while allowing me to indulge quietly my instinctive diffidence towards all those individuals that are not called Jacob Waszowski. I admit it is quite a narrowing parameter, but why question something that serves me so very well?

Yet this time something felt, dare I say, wrong about his attitude. Try as I may, I could not shake the impression that he was using that charming cordiality of his to protect himself, instead of opening a channel of communication. Then the realisation hit me that the sight was so unsettling because, after all, he had learnt the technique from me.

It was a deeply disturbing epiphany. The raw horror I felt right then, thinking that I had achieved infecting him with my disease, brought me to interrupt him so brusquely. If I hadn't, I know that I would have jumped off the train and broken my neck, or vomited along the tracks.

So I broke etiquette instead, and completed the introductions.

I felt like I had just stepped over my own grave: no other way to describe the shift in atmosphere I detected immediately after closing my mouth.

I also sensed that Jack had found whatever memory it was that he had been looking for so wildly. I could tell from the way he steadied his shoulders and braced his feet that it was not good.

Oh Lord, what had I done this time? Surely the occasion was too trivial for cutting off one's senior to be an intolerable offence...?

Then I understood, with a feeling I had thought -I had *hoped*- at last forgotten, a feeling that choked me like black smoke, that the two strangers had stiffened in response not to my own actions but... to my name.

For a moment, space and time stood still.

And then, the dark-haired gentleman sitting on my right stood up, fluid and harmonious like foliage swept by summer breeze.

I *knew*. I already knew, even before he spoke.

"I am Sherlock Holmes, and this is my friend and colleague, Dr. Watson", he said, his voice echoing in my hears like a tolling bell.

Even though you know that perfectly well already, he also added, without need to move his lips, and the smoke inside of me rose higher, filling my lungs and drowning my mind.

I heard waterfalls, calling my name in the distance. I felt salt flooding my veins instead of blood, sucking me dry, and invisible kicks shattering my ribcage. I felt spit raining on my face, and my legs becoming lead, trapping me here, oh God *here*, in the heart of the world and the nightmare, where reality is closer than the next breath and at the same time impossible to reach, because an invisible, stifling film coats everything and forbids actual touch, every attempt more useless than trying to grasp thin air.

I saw my mother through an open door, suffocating on her own tears, shouting and slapping the Colonel's face in my father's study.

I stood over an empty grave, with no corpse nor mourners, only worms and lies and the remains of a life never that brought only death in its wake.

I read a detective story in a magazine, and grieved all over again, knowing that another soul had been left behind, alone.

But then I felt a hand sliding into mine, thumb gently rubbing the fabric of skin between my own thumb and my forefinger; I turned, and Jack was looking at me, pulling me away from my waking nightmares and out to reality, because even then all my world was already in his eyes.

I sighed, and I was once again on a train in 1900, with three sets of eyes all focused on me. I estimate that no longer than four, maybe five seconds had elapsed. *A sparrow is falling*, the thought came to me unbidden. In the end, "*the readiness is all*". "Mr. Holmes", I said, my throat dry like I hadn't used it for years, engaging all my strength to hold that pale gaze that made me think of moors, and gathering storms, and all things strange and alien. "It's an honour to meet you", and I offered him my hand.

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11. Holmes, Dover to London

by mazaher

There he was. The son. I recognized the line of the jaw, of the orbits; the free earlobe. But a gentler influence had been at work on his fine features, the cheekbones, the eyes... A pianist, yes, by the telling, slight dystonic collapse of the metacarpal heads. A fencer, taking by instinct an en garde position in his momentary uncertainty. An avid reader, and fluent in German, by the Stuttgart edition of Faust (Cottascher, 1862) he carried in his left pocket, probably an item from his father's library, which he seemed to have read many times. Fond of his mother, whose gift of a golden chain for his watch, of a peculiar Irish make now outmoded, he was unwilling to part with. Uncommonly unconventional; uncommonly brave. Perhaps slightly unbalanced. As obviously loyal to his companion as he was to him, which means they both were fine gentlemen, because an evil heart knows no faith.

I took the hand which was proffered to me. The handshake was firm, dry, steady. Only the slightest vibration in the fingers betrayed an effort at self-control.

"As you surely know, I was acquainted with your father," I said, "and while I can't say the acquaintance was in any way pleasant for either of us, I wish you to know that he had all my appreciation for the sporting spirit he showed on our last encounter. The fight was fair, if not the steps the Colonel took afterwards. I trust that you do not hold a grudge against me for having been the agent of his demise."

I had kept my eyes unfocused and pointed halfway toward Watson as I spoke; I knew how heavy the weight of the loss of a father can be, even the worst of them, and I needed to remind myself that I was not alone, contemplating two instances of such loss at the same time. But as I let go of his hand and it slipped from mine, I finally raised my eyes to young Moriarty's.

He was slightly flushed, and a throb of emotions fought in his eyes which were made all the darker by his dilated pupils. He must have been uneasy at having to choose between an officious, and perhaps insincere, defence of his father, on one hand, and a forced expression of his reserves about his character, on the other. My relations with my own parent having been anything but peaceful, I found myself unusually moved by his troubled countenance.

"I do not," he said at last, and his voice was hushed but steady. "Whatever his reasons and his plans, I regret the pain he left behind. It is my hope that at least in death there will be peace, and an end to the suffering. He was my father, and I won't disown him: I see too much of him in myself. But I am also my mother's son, and I am a separate person from them both. Whatever my life is now and is going to be in the future, it is my responsibility alone. I will not judge, and I hope I won't be judged in my turn."

"It is not my habit to follow the biblical maxim that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon their sons.¹¹ I believe each man should stand up for himself, and it seems that on this matter we are in agreement."

"Thank you," he murmured.

¹¹ Traditionally extrapolated from a number of passages, notably Exodus, 20:5; Numbers, 14:18; and Jeremiah, 32:18.

I heard Watson sigh quietly, then he moved to stand up with a slow effort. He has an uncanny talent for shifting the focus of a situation before the fire reaches the mine. He offered his own hand.

“Mr. Moriarty, how do you do? Dr. Waszowski, I’m pleased to meet you. Won’t you gentlemen sit down?”

They did, Waszowski gesturing his friend to sit on the far side of the compartment, in the opposite corner from me, and then taking his seat between him and Watson. This way he could act as buffer between us and Moriarty, all the while allowing him to keep an eye on me as, if not the more dangerous, the more motivated to a potential attack. So much for the social conventions of choosing seats! I knew then that they were lovers, and as fiercely devoted to each other as my own Watson and I.

I found the thought strangely comforting.

I watched them in silence for a while, as the two doctors engaged in polite conversation (the previous strain barely felt and dissipating, ragged remnants of the thunderclouds after a storm) and young Moriarty lost himself in a daydream –or a fugue– of his own, his gaze fixed on the darkening countryside outside the door to his right, his left hand abandoned on the armrest and almost touching his companion’s elbow.

I could see that they had come together so much earlier than we had... And yet, it was obvious it hadn’t been any easier. It was the most beautiful thing in the world to see. I didn’t feel envious, and I’m sure Watson didn’t either, as he smiled his wise smile at his younger colleague with open cordiality. I could see these two young men were on fire for each other. One, a wild flame, ready for destruction as for the smelting of gold; the other, hot steady embers for keeping warm and cooking food and saving lives.

I began then to understand that the fire, when it is pure and true, is not extinguished by the passage of time, but rather stoked and made hotter by it.

I felt it then. I feel it now.

::

12. Waszowski, Dover to London

by athens7

For all the duration of the exchange, my heart kept beating so wildly, I was sure it would eventually smash through my ribcage and leave me dying on the floor of the carriage, with a gaping hole in my chest and only a maroon ceiling to look at.

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to take Patrick’s hand and run away, from everyone and everything, to the top of the highest mountain and to the most hidden place at the centre of us, where we would always, always be one and safe.

And I wanted for the two of them to never stop talking, to continue endlessly to acknowledge each other’s merits and forgive each other’s wrongs, in a perfect, self-sufficient circuit of sins committed and mercy granted, of death and rebirth and life invincible.

They were so beautiful, standing tall and fierce one in front of the other, their chins raised and their eyes ablaze with the restrained power of their personalities; so near, and yet so far, as if divided by a small river running as deep as the ocean. Their inner light, I concluded, was the one characteristic that they absolutely shared: burning and irresistible like the Sun, fragile and secret like the Moon, a flame where all opposites meet. They both have eyes that easily give them away for not actually belonging to this world. They fell to earth a long time ago, and never managed to find their way back to the stars, so they had to slowly, painfully learn how to behave around us mere mortals without arousing too many suspicions. They succeeded wonderfully, but every now and then the mask slips, a gust of wind moves the veil in the odd direction; the truth lying beneath shines beyond all words, and then retreats again into the woods.

This was one of such moments.

Looking for one second at Doctor Watson looking at them, I understood one more thing: that he and I both are guardians standing at the threshold of these two worlds, never and always touching.

The thought of Patrick's face, had he been able to listen to my ramblings just then, was so endearing, I couldn't stop a smile from touching my lips.

My eyes went back to him. He appeared as immovable as a cliff endlessly beaten by the waves, and yet I could see that his hands were slightly trembling. That vulnerability, that he always manages so poorly to conceal, will never cease to be my undoing.

The pride, the soul-deep affection I felt for him then, my dearest, dearest Patrick, assailed me and suffused my every sinew and marrow with such intensity that my blood sang with it and my eyes stung; I had to cross my arms to prevent myself from kneeling in front of Sherlock Holmes and thanking him with the salt of my tears.

Thank you for giving this to him, I wanted to whisper, to shout, to simply say (to us!, a small, hidden part of me timidly added, but I found not the courage to acknowledge it). My tongue was heavy with the weight of those unuttered words. But I should have not worried: Patrick heard me, and spoke for the both of us.

His 'thank you' felt like a deliverance. It still does.

Then the other guardian, my counterpart in the play, stepped in.

The revelation ended, we once again crossed the threshold towards reality, towards the earth. We sat, I engaged in idle conversation with the good doctor (what a wonderful gentleman! and what lovely, much-needed companionship he provided to me in those delicate moments!); but I helplessly kept stealing glances at my lover. I couldn't shake away the fear that, contrary to my initial assumption, he had indeed failed to return with the rest of us; for he was staring at the landscape rapidly disappearing in our trail like he usually stares at the paper while composing, that is, not really seeing it at all.

Doctor Watson, gentle soul that he was showing time and again to be, soon sensed my apprehensive mood, and elegantly led our talk to a temporary conclusion, leaving me free to address my worries.

I struggled with myself but for a few minutes. We were all suspended in a situation that went well beyond all convention and social morals; it was very, very possible (oh, who was I fooling? It was Sherlock Holmes we were dealing with here!) that I had already betrayed the true nature of our relationship with my choice of seat, and God only knows how many lapses had escaped my conscious control.

To Hell with it, I thought, and shifted my elbow on the armrest between Patrick and me.

My stomach sank lower and lower as the seconds dragged by; to me, they felt like centuries.

My brain was already starting to revise frantically recovery plans, approach strategies, recuperation techniques when... his arm moved as well, so that we were touching, from our elbows all the way down to our fingertips. I adjusted as discreetly as possible (why did I even bother with subtlety at that point, is still beyond me), and then my hand was marginally covering his.

Right then, it felt better and sweeter than any kiss I could ever give him.

Still, we dared not look at each other. We had already pushed our resistance to the limits.

As Patrick's warmth soaked my fingers and seeped through my skin, filling all the fractures and laving away all the uncertainty, all I could do was send a blessing for the other couple accompanying us. To the present day, this memory of them makes my heart leap. They have risked life and limb together. They have shed blood, their own and their enemies'. Our dangers, our choices, our wounds have mostly been of the mind... But I think they know, as well as we do, that the landscapes of the mind are as real, and as dangerous and ruthless, as the high plains of Afghanistan or the backstreets of London's darker belly. They were beautiful to behold, tempered by the same fire. I want... I know we will be as beautiful, when we'll get to their age.

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13. Watson, Dover to London

by mazaher

The train rolled on. There was silence, but it was not the ominous silence before a storm. Lightning-- dazed realisation. Thunder-- electricity discharging between clouds in transit. After, only our breathing like quiet rain, in peace.

It is strange, to look into a mirror. Not the passing glance to check the straightness of a tie, but the long gaze into one's image which extends to past and future both. They say that there's no worst nightmare than meeting oneself in dreams...

But what I know is that one only ever meets oneself in dreams, and not all of them are nightmares.

Here we were, four men in a train compartment, two couples of lovers (I did not doubt they were, nor that they knew about us), two couples of twins, two warriors, two healers, mirroring each other.

The dark countryside unfolded out of the window, the sudden whoosh of trees clumped along the line, the occasional whistle from the engine, and the Greek hyphenation of the points at Beckenham Junction as the wheels rolled over. Already I could glimpse the scattered lights of Dulwich in the distance, announcing that the journey was near its end. I felt then that never again would such a moment happen, not by chance or by fate. I wanted to acknowledge it, as a soldier and as a man. I stood up, straightened my coat, crossed the short width of the compartment, turned around, and sat myself on my lover's left. His hand slightly moved in surprise. I covered it with mine, twining my fingers with his. (They were chilled). A moment later, I felt him relaxing. My eyes softly took in the whole of the narrow space, the dim light, the dark coats, the composed faces.

The world has a way of righting itself at times.

I felt good.

::

14 Moriarty, Dover to London

by athens7

What is there more to say?

I felt exhausted; my mind was blessedly silent. With Jack's soft, composed breathing serving as my own private lullaby, I closed my eyes. The delicate whisper of tweed trousers against worn-out upholstery awoke me again, just in time to let me see Doctor Watson standing up, crossing the small compartment, and sitting again beside the Detective.

I must confess here that I love with a passion the things left unsaid. I'm fascinated by ambiguity, and repulsed by explicitness. Nevertheless, all I could do in that moment was wonder at the bold blatancy of the Doctor's statement. To this day, I am still impressed with its elegance, its beauty, the likes of which I have rarely witnessed again.

Journeys end in lovers meeting, I mused briefly. I would have liked to say it aloud.

There we were, Jack and I, being granted the gift that no man alive should ever be allowed to even go near: a glimpse into the future. And not in the form of cryptic oracular utterances or augural flocks, but in that of two *doppelgängers*, of a parallel bond living and breathing and loving right before our own eyes. Our entwined hands reminded me that there was not even the need for us to reach out and take it: it was already ours. Present and future were already occupying the same space in our lives.

Jack's hand tightened around mine. Once I was really certain I had regained at least a modicum of composure, I raised my eyes to his, and found a mirror of my every thought. He smiled at me then, magnificent and unrestrained, his teeth lightly showing. I allowed myself to be mesmerized by the dimples in his cheeks, by the faint wrinkles surrounding his eyes, the curve of his brows.

No one smiles like my Jack. When we first met, I used to... yes, to fear his smiles; they made me feel so exposed, so helpless. After all these years, their effect on me has not changed in the slightest; but I have.

I felt my lips beginning to curve in response, so I covered them with my palm. Then I asked myself what exactly should I ever keep hidden from this man, and why; I couldn't find an answer. I let my hand fall away. I turned fully towards him, so that he could see me all. We stayed like that for a moment or two. Then Jack nodded, and I knew it was in acknowledgment of the future sitting right beside us. I sighed, and leaned back in my seat.

We knew. One day, perhaps, we would let ourselves believe it as well. This was the promise we silently made to each other in the final moments of that fateful, exceptional journey.

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15. Holmes, London

by mazaher

11:25. Victoria Station, two minutes and a half late. I tip slightly forward as the engine slows down and stops.

Maybe I'm amazed (at the way he loves me all the time)

Watson's fingers slip out of mine. Time has run out.

Maybe I'm afraid (at the way I love him)

We all four stand, crowding each other in the compartment as we turn to pull our luggage off the nets overhead.

Maybe I'm a lonely man who's in the middle of something that he doesn't really understand

Careful not to break the fragile something which happened among us tonight.

Maybe I'm amazed (at the way he's with me all the time)

In a moment we are going to part forever, two on one side, two on the other.

He rights me when I'm wrong.

Yet I know we belong on the same side. I also know they know.

Maybe I'm afraid (at the way I really need you)

Puffs of steam. Lights. Whistles. The echoes of Victoria Station at night. Muffled goodbyes under the clock in the hall. It's over. We're almost home.

Someone should put this to music.¹²

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¹² Someone in fact did (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm2YyVZBL8U>)