

Seems So Easy for Everybody Else

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Seems So Easy for Everybody Else

by [etohepii](#)

Summary

He signs his correspondences to the police as Sherlock H, as he always has, and he signs his letters to his parents as SH -- they can take what they will from the S. He signs his school assignments S. Holmes, and manages to get away with it because he is the only Holmes in his classes. FtM!Sherlock. Contains trigger warnings for trans issues and brief mention of suicidal ideation.

Sophie Charlotte Holmes realizes she notices more than most adults by the time she's six. She doesn't let it get to her head. Her brother Mycroft is already thirteen and much better than her at their game, which has no name but that she secretly calls "Make All the Adults Angry".

"Mrs. Harrington spends a lot of time with her chef. There's flour on the back of her blouse, so she meets with him before lunch, when he's baking bread," Charlotte says, and Mycroft nods. He has a small pile of books in his book bag, from the library her father's forbidden her from entering. Their father leaves it locked, but Mycroft can still get in; he promised to teach her how when she got older, and she's looking forward to it.

At her declaration, he doles out one of the books.

It is about butterflies. Mummy has already shown it to her, sitting Charlotte in her lap as she smoothed her fingers over the pages and taught her the many different names for their many different types.

"That was worth one hour," he says. "Another half if you can identify at least five species of the butterflies in the garden."

--

Mycroft is the best elder brother in the world, because he never gets bored of her and he never forces her to obey him the way Mummy and Papa do. He will carry her if she gets tired, and answer her questions after she asks Papa and Papa tells her, "I'll tell you when you're older."

Mummy thinks that Mycroft's trying to turn Charlotte into a smaller, female version of himself. She says as much to Papa at night, when Charlotte is supposed to be asleep.

Charlotte's pretty sure he is too, but she doesn't mind. She'd *like* to be just like him, when she gets older. He's smart and kind (to her, at least; he doesn't much care for anyone who isn't family, but that's all right), but most importantly: he always gets what he wants.

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Primary school is boring and a huge waste of her time. Mycroft agrees.

She is curious and easily bored, so she spends most of her time figuring out interesting facts about her teachers and saying them aloud when they interrupt her.

"Why do you drink alcohol from your desk?" she asks, when her teacher takes away her book. It doesn't get her back the book, which is about the native flora of marshes, and has dozens of interesting pictures, but it *does* get her sent to the headmaster's office.

Mummy makes despairing noises, and Papa seems unsure if he's pleased at her cheek or annoyed because she's getting in trouble. But the opinion that matters most is Mycroft's.

When he finds out, he slips her a pound coin when their parents aren't looking. He tells them he'll take her with him on a walk after supper, and after supper he bribes one of the servants to drive them to the city to purchase sweets.

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She doesn't get on well with the other children, because she is too clever for them by far, and because they are even more boring than lying on the grass by herself. At least if she's by herself, she can think of interesting things to ask Mycroft when she gets home.

But she doesn't like the feeling of being left-out when they form up in groups to play sports and no one wants her on their team.

The girls spend most of their time playing house and stupid clapping games (too easy, no challenge). But one of them -- Emily, who is less boring than most, and doesn't mind sitting next to Charlotte when they eat lunch, teaches her an interesting game with a loop of yarn.

She tells Mummy about it when she gets home, and begs prettily until Mummy cuts a length of yarn for her and knots the ends together.

"Do you know how to play Cat's Cradle?" she asks Mycroft on the weekend, and holds out her hands, the opening gambit already in place.

"No, show me," he says, and she transfers the yarn, form intact, onto his hands.

"You go like this, on this shape," she tells him, and demonstrates.

He nods gravely, and examines the second figure, a flat X. "What's the goal?"

"Make the other person make a tangle," she says, and he pinches his fingers around the wrong spot, then pulls. It holds, and creates a pattern she's never seen before (strange, because when she'd played it with Mummy, the patterns looped, eventually going back to the first pattern without any changes).

She guesses her next move and ends with a snarl of fabric around her fingers. "How did you do that?" she demands, thrilled. "Tell me."

He explains it to her, how to read the lines of yarn and see where they'll go when pulled. He patiently allows her to practice with him until she's got the moves figured out, knows how to turn any standard shape into a deceptive structure that will collapse immediately.

And after that, he unknots the string and offers to teach her how to tie different types of knots and how to follow the paths of each line, so she'll know where to pull to undo them.

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She shows her trick to Emily the next day, triumphant. Instead of being impressed, Emily throws the yarn at her face, and tells her she's not playing fair.

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The boys won't play with her because she's wearing a dress, a pretty pink one that Mummy had ordered from somewhere important. She can't sit on the ground, because she'll get her stockings dirty, and she can't dig in the dirt with them (looking for worms, which is interesting, because worms don't have a brain like people do, but they have a band around their middles that is sort of the same thing), because it will get on her dress and make Mummy upset.

She sits on the ground next to them anyways, and follows the tracks of a cat to its end, where there is a dead rat, half-decomposed in the hot sun. Fat white grubs squirm on its body, twisting and turning.

The boys make faces and dare each other to get closer, shoving each other closer and then running back.

She remembers the anatomy books Mycroft has shown her, and wants to see how much the skull of the rat matches the pictures in the book. She brushes some of the maggots from its head with a stick she picks off the ground.

The boys shriek with disgust and glee. One tells her that she's "*almost* as good as a boy".

The following incident gets her in the headmaster's office again.

Afterwards, the girls won't talk to her (one calls her "Ratty Sherry" and when no one's looking, Charlotte uses a pair of scissors to cut a hole in her jacket). But Ricky sits down next to her when she's waiting for one of the servants to pick her up and asks her if it was really gross, poking the rat, then tells her he wishes he'd been there to see.

It's a fair trade.

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She doesn't want to be girly and pretty and sweet.

She wants to be like Mycroft -- smart and strong and fierce (well, he's not very fierce, but she will be). She wants to go off and have adventures. She wants to go to Africa and China and all the other countries she reads about, and see things no one else has seen before.

She wants to solve mysteries and learn to box and show everyone that she can do amazing things.

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Her Mummy and Papa tell her that if a man ever tries to touch her, or make her go with him somewhere, to scream as loud as she can and to run away just as quickly.

This doesn't seem very effective, because her legs are short and adults pick her up *all the time*, swinging her in the air. She mentions as much to Mycroft, while he is doing homework and she is looking through his schoolbooks -- they're interesting, even if she sometimes has to ask him to explain a concept to her.

Mycroft buys her a book of human anatomy on her next birthday, a real one, a textbook instead of those dull children's books Mummy buys her because she thinks Charlotte will prefer the unrealistic, overly-colored pictures on the pages. They lie on the grass one weekend and look through it together. Mycroft tells her about all the places on the human body where even a small girl can do a lot of damage.

Mycroft tells her she's small, so she doesn't have to fight fair.

But she doesn't see why she would have in the first place.

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She loves her Papa, because she doesn't have much of a choice, but she doesn't *like* him.

He is smug and condescending, and whenever she asks a question, he smiles at her like she's too stupid to understand. Which is ridiculous, because she sees more than he does -- she just doesn't tell people, because they always get so upset.

But to him, she will always just be an empty-headed *girl*, even when she deduces that the kitchen boy was the one stealing Mummy's rings. She says as such and Papa tells her not to make accusations, but when Mycroft suggests it, Papa looks under the kitchen boy's bed (she'd said they were there!) and finds the missing rings, and congratulates him on his keen intellect.

"I knew they were there," she says to Mycroft petulantly. "I knew before you did."

Mycroft pets her hair. "I know you did, Sherry, but only because I didn't hear the facts until an hour ago."

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She has always known the anatomical differences between males and females -- it was in one of the other books, but she doesn't ask Mycroft about sex until she's nine and her classmates giggle about it as if it's a huge secret. It is apparently a taboo subject (she doesn't see why).

He tells her what she wants to know, about the different ways animals reproduce, but she already knows these things. When she says as such -- and he'd been the one to quiz her about angler fish and praying mantises, and their various courtship rituals -- he laughs and gives her a hug.

"That's my Sherry," he says, affectionate. He, and sometimes their parents, are the only ones allowed to call her Sherry. Everyone else gets a cutting observation (her father's boss doesn't visit anymore, after she'd pointedly asked why he always watched her mummy's bum when he thought no one else was looking).

Mycroft's ninth birthday present to her had been his old set of lockpicks, and lessons on how to use them.

Now, he tugs on one of her long curls (something only he is allowed to do), and tells her where to find the locked room that holds Mummy's collection of erotica -- Mycroft calls them

romance novels, but she knows what he means, as well as which drawer in Papa's office to look in for his dirty magazines.

Aside from the thrill of holding something forbidden, something that could get her in a lot of trouble if she gets caught, they are largely uninteresting.

But picking the lock is fun.

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And then Mycroft has to leave for university.

"Sherry, don't be so cross. Uni isn't much different from boarding school," he says, but it is not the same at all, because Mycroft won't have as much time to come home and visit, which means she won't have anyone to teach her things or sit with her when she gets lonely.

"But you won't be coming home on the weekends anymore. You'll forget me." Her eyes are burning, but rather than fight it down, she widens her eyes, letting the tears well. Mycroft immediately looks sorry.

"I won't. I promise," Mycroft says and tucks her under his arm, bringing her head against his chest. "I'll write to you, and call you every day, and we'll talk about all the stupid things your teachers do that you can't tell anyone else because they'd say you were being rude."

"I hate talking on the phone." She snuffles, then wipes her nose on his shirt as obnoxiously as possible.

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She misses him as much as she'd miss seeing, or breathing (more than she'd miss her right arm, because she's got *two* arms and her left hand is almost as good as her right, in penmanship). She writes letters to him and he always writes back, but it is not the same *at all*. She is alone and bored and she hates it.

He calls, but she hates talking on the phone, so she speaks to him only briefly before handing the receiver back to mummy.

Mycroft's not here to answer her questions. He's not here to sit with her when she's at home. He can't lend her his books when he's done with them, or bring her to the city with him. They don't live too far from the shops, but it's too far to walk, and at any rate, she's not *allowed* to walk by herself, because it's not safe.

She cries herself to sleep for three weeks, and doesn't breathe a word of it to anybody.

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She can't go to Eton, because she's not allowed. Her parents want to send her to a girls' school, where she'll learn sewing and etiquette and dancing and a million other boring things she doesn't care about. It'd be the *best* girls' school, the best in the country, but she doesn't care.

She doesn't want to go.

She stops speaking until they stop trying.

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She doesn't know what she expects from boarding school, but mostly it's just as boring as primary school. Everyone already has a best friend and a second-best friend, and she doesn't have anyone. No one is interesting enough for her and no one seems to want to be her friend.

She used to have Mycroft, so she hadn't cared, because Mycroft was better than all of them. But now she doesn't. She's alone, and far from home, and she doesn't want to call her parents because she knows her father will laugh at her and say, "I knew my baby girl would miss us," and use it as proof she's too fragile to do anything.

She is determined not to miss her parents. It's not as hard as she'd thought it'd be.

She goes to the library every week and eats through books as quickly as a brushfire. She works her way through any subject that catches her interest, because she has no interest in sports, or in making friends with the others. She gets high marks in all her classes and goes days without speaking, except to answer direct questions.

She doesn't go home on the weekends.

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Her head of house sends a letter to her mother when she first begins to menstruate. Charlotte has no idea why; it's not something she sees the point in celebrating, and it's not as if she'd had any *part* in her body's sudden tendency towards being disgusting at the most inconvenient of times.

Her mother sends her a proud, congratulatory letter telling her that she's a woman now, and going to be getting attention from boys, and when she comes home for the holidays they can go shopping for makeup and clothing, and isn't that exciting?

No. No it isn't.

--

"You're taller than I remember," Mycroft says when he arrives home for the winter holiday. He gives her a tight hug, lifting her feet off the ground until she kicks his shins. She's already been home for two days, and has spent most of it in her rooms with her favorite volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica. "I brought you a present."

"Oh? What sort of present?" she asks warily, because her father had got her a skirt (when she hasn't voluntarily worn a dress in years), and her mother had got her a bra (though her breasts weren't yet developed enough to need one).

Mycroft casts a glance at their parents. "A scarf," he says, but there is a pleased smugness in his eyes that tell her, clear as day, that he hadn't *only* brought her a scarf. Good, she thinks.

That's why he's her favorite.

Mycroft has arrived just in time for dinner. She hasn't the time to needle more information about what his gift before her father bustles them to the table.

At dinner, her mother says proudly, "Charlotte's just become a woman, haven't you, dear?"

She shrugs, noncommittal. She stabs at a piece of meat with her fork. "I suppose." She doesn't feel like much of a woman. She doesn't want to be a woman, she just wants to be herself.

"Do you like any boys yet? Anyone nice catch your eye?" her father asks.

Across the table, Mycroft raises an amused eyebrow at her. "Yes, Sherry. Have you met any nice boys?" He's mocking her.

"No," she says, and narrows her eyes at her brother, "but Mycroft's not a virgin anymore."

Mycroft's eyes widen with surprise. Her father laughs. Her mother turns her focus to Mycroft instead, immediately demanding to know more, and Charlotte feels better.

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Later, after Mycroft has escaped their parents' wrath and/or curiosity, she picks the lock on his door and climbs onto his bed, where he is sitting with a book open on his upraised knees. She prods his leg with her toes. "What did you bring me?"

Mycroft scowls at her, but she can tell he doesn't mean it. "I don't know if I want to give it to you, now that you told Mummy what I've been up to."

"Liar. You're proud of me. I should be rewarded," she says, and his false ire is replaced with pleasure.

"Perhaps," he says, and digs into his bookbag, taking out a handful of books that all look *fascinating*, a small bell, a notebook, and a gleaming pair of handcuffs. He lays them all out on the bed, between them. "Which did I bring you?"

The books are checked out from the university library, except for the one on philosophy -- but that's for one of his classes, so he can't spare it right now. She'll get it later, once he's finished with it. She doesn't need to rifle through the notebook to know it belongs to him, or to see that he's not done filling its pages.

That leaves the bell and the handcuffs -- but the bell, while pretty and undoubtedly useful, isn't something she can't get on her own, or that she couldn't ask their parents to buy her.

She picks up the handcuffs. "This, of course. But you stole it from somewhere, didn't you?"

He doesn't deny it. "Put them on me," he says and holds out his wrists. She does so. Several minutes later, with the help of a paperclip slipped from a pocket, he's free. He laughs at the

look in her eyes. "It'll only take a few days to teach you, and you can keep them to practice with."

"This is much better than the scarf," she says, then adds loyally, "But the scarf was lovely as well. Thank you, Mycroft."

"Anything for you, Sherry."

--

It takes her two days to figure out how to pick the cuffs while handcuffed, and only an additional one to figure out how to hold her hands to keep the metal rings from being tightened too tightly around her wrists, followed by how to tuck her thumb against her palm properly for her to slip them loose.

Mycroft rewards her by letting her come into his room at night to watch films her parents think she's too young to see. Her parents know very little about her reading habits, if they think a topless woman or a violent murder is going to give her nightmares.

She has to rush to finish reading all the books in Mycroft's book bag by the end of the holidays, but he doesn't seem to mind. He goes out to visit his school chums, and by the time he returns, she's done with reading and he sits with her and tells her stories about all his grand adventures at university.

"Promise you'll write to me," she orders the night before he leaves, and refuses to give back his watch until he does.

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She hates the way the pain hits her, low in the gut, every month. The other girls flutter together in the hallways and giggle about it, about puberty, as if it's something mysterious instead of a well-documented, completely predictable phenomenon.

But for her, it's not something to be proud of; it's just another way her body fights her, changing against her wishes, unstoppable and uncontrollable. She briefly considers trying gymnastics, because if she keeps her weight down and her body strained, she'll no longer menstruate and her breasts will stay small.

But Mycroft would know why in an instant, so she doesn't.

--

My Dearest Sherry,

I promised I would, so I am writing to you. Mummy says you're having trouble with some girls at school. She called and told me to give you advice on how to avoid being bullied. I told her I would, so if she asks, please act sufficiently grateful and advised.

If you are, in fact, being bullied, remember that young girls are insecure about their weight, and that while you may get in trouble for saying something cruel, you'll not be expelled. That

means don't manufacture any deadly toxins, because lawyers cost money and I don't want you to squander my inheritance.

Also, you don't actually have any boys sniffing after you, do you? You're too young yet.

*Love,
Mycroft Holmes*

Dear Mycroft,

I told Mummy you reminded me that I was very beautiful in my own right, and that I was no longer bothered by what was said about me. She seemed to believe me.

Thank you for the advice. It worked wonderfully. Also, the girls' bathrooms are not an appropriate place to conduct chemistry experiments, so I have moved found an abandoned classroom on the top floor instead.

Regarding your inheritance: half of it is mine, and I will do with it what I want. No boys are interested in me. I'm too skinny by far, and while my breasts are developing, they are nothing compared to the older girls. Also, I've been given to believe that I may frighten some of my peers.

Tell me more about university. Mother says she won't let me skip any years and go early. Do you have much fun there? How is the library? At the rate I'm reading, I'm worried that I'll run out of things to read by the end of my third year here, accounting for time taken away for holidays and experiments.

*Love,
S. Charlotte Holmes*

Dear Mycroft,

I'm bored. The curriculum is boring. Nearly all the students are boring, and all the interesting ones say I'm too young to be friends with, and half of these books are rubbish. What should I do?

*Love,
Charlotte*

Dear Charlotte,

I've attached a newspaper article regarding a "mysterious" theft. What do you think of it?

Love,
Mycroft Holmes

Dear Mycroft,

How is this mysterious? The treasurer or secretary (whichever is involved with the member of the sports team) did it. Give me something more interesting.

But thank you for the effort.

Love,
Charlotte

Dear Charlotte,

Here's one involving a murder. I've solved it already, but it's not very challenging so you should be able to figure it out too.

Love,
Mycroft Holmes

Dear Mycroft,

Better, thank you! Much more challenging than maths. The algebra here's rather rudimentary, not nearly as rigorous as was taught at Eton. The gardener did the murder, but someone he was close to (a family member?) moved the body and placed it there to avoid suspicion, while giving the gardener an alibi (probably went to a pub).

Love,
Charlotte

Dear Charlotte,

Correct, but you missed that the brother added extra wounds to the body as well, to try and make it look like the man died from injuries rather than poison. You shouldn't charge less than ten pounds per homework assignment, and don't forget to make several mistakes so it seems realistic.

Happy Birthday. Congratulations on being 12. You are now one year from being a teenager. I'm sure Mummy is ecstatic.

Love,
Mycroft Holmes

--

She's always been tall and kind of skinny. The best thing about her is her hair, her parents agree. (Personally, she thinks the best thing about her is her ability to slip handcuffs without needing to pick them, and she knows Mycroft thinks the best thing about her is that she's willing to follow him).

But as her growth spurt hits and she eventually, finally has to wear a bra (her housemistress had told her so as if it was as a reward for being that much closer to womanhood). Mostly, she hates it. Not the thing itself, which is uncomfortable and annoying, but the way the other girls look at her now.

Before, they'd excluded her because she was mean, and also cruel (she doesn't consider herself cruel, but she can see where they get the idea). Now, they exclude her because she's ugly -- too tall, too bony, eyes too colorless, chest too flat.

--

She develops her first crush at the age of thirteen, on Desmond Wallace. He is two years older than her, but only one year ahead. He is handsome and smart (not as smart as she, but still above average) and kind, and she wants him with a sort of confused yearning that makes no sense at all.

She sits next to him after classes and pretends to be impressed when he sneaks a fag even though she'd smoked one with Mycroft three years ago, when she'd been curious about the taste. Her heart soars when he smiles at her, and she's crushed when she goes a day without seeing him, and overall the whole experience is...

Strange. She's not sure she likes having her emotions so closely tied to someone else.

She's not naive, and she knows he puts up with her because he thinks he'll get to have sex with her and because he likes the attention. She pays him an awful lot of attention. More than he deserves. More than she'd give him if she had anything better to do, but she evidently hasn't.

Thankfully, her infatuation with him ends when he tries to put his hand down her trousers.

Well, more accurately, it ends when he tries to put his hand down her trousers *after she said she'd rather he didn't* and she accidentally bumps his eye. With her fist. And then trips over his ribs repeatedly. How clumsy of her.

He doesn't tell anyone what happened, because he can't bear to admit he got beaten up by a girl. Obviously, she doesn't tell anyone about it because it shows an embarrassing lack of judgment on her part.

Mycroft finds out anyway.

--

The police won't listen to her about Carl Powers.

"Maybe you should stop calling them names," Mycroft suggests; he's found her latest letter, half-written (she'd been writing it while she waited for him to get home -- he'd taken a few days off work to come visit). "I'm sure the chief of police doesn't like being told his troubled marriage is blinding him to the facts of the case."

"First of all," she says, "It's true. Secondly, the last time I tried being nice, they told me I was a 'sweet girl' for trying to help them, but that they couldn't be having with mere speculation, and to leave the work to the adults."

"Mustn't have tried hard enough then. Don't forget people aren't as smart as you are. You need to walk your reader through every minute step you took to arrive at your conclusion, even if it's blindingly obvious. Also, stop signing them as Sophie. If you use a male name, you'll be more respected."

She scowls at him, but it's true. She signs the letter *Sherlock H*. She examines her handwriting for a moment. It looks messy enough; her normal handwriting is nothing like the trite, neat script the girls in her classes use, with their stupid decorations over the i's.

"Better?" she asks, and offers it to Mycroft.

Mycroft makes her rewrite it twice, until he deems her letter no longer likely to mortally offend anyone previously involved in the case, then gives her tips on what sort of unobtrusive phrases to say that aren't too obvious, but will still make people feel predisposed towards liking her.

It's too late to change her name while talking about this case, as they've already received a half-dozen letters from her signed by Sophie H. But when she has to contact them again, she signs as Sherlock, and they are none the wiser.

--

She's not stupid. She knows what puberty is. She knows the effect hormones will have (are having) on her emotional state. That doesn't make it hurt less, or make her *hate* it less. It just makes her more aware that she's being manipulated by her body in a way that is simply *unacceptable*.

She's too skinny, too tall, too flat. Her mother thinks she should eat more and date a nice boy. Her father thinks she should dress nicer. She wears her uniforms for school a size or two too big, and hates dresses and skirts with a sort of burning passion she's had for as long as she can remember. She wears trousers as often as she's able.

She hates how she looks. Her face is pretty enough, she supposes, but she hates everything else and she doesn't know why.

Everything feels *wrong*, and she doesn't know how to fix it.

--

My Dear Sherlock,

Calling in tips for the police? Congratulations. I read your pseudonym in the paper the other day. How's school?

*Love,
Mycroft*

Dear Mycroft,

School is dull. The classes are dull and the activities are dull. The girls are beastly and the boys are childish and immature. Mother keeps buying me dresses and I keep refusing to wear them. However, I've started corresponding with the police (through the mail with a post box of course), and it's brilliant.

Why did you never tell me our games could be so fun?

*Love,
Sherlock Holmes*

PS: May I have an old copy of your driving license?

Dear Sherlock,

I've enclosed an expired driving license. I assume you're smart enough to know better than to cut at with a kitchen knife, of course? A box knife will give you much better precision. You told Mummy you haven't your eye on any boys, but I trust you'd let me know if you really did.

*Love,
Mycroft*

Dear Mycroft,

Boys don't like girls who can beat them in hand-to-hand combat or who can throw knives accurately at a range of ten yards. Also, I'm taller than most of them, and haven't yet stopped growing. Smarter, too.

*Love,
Charlotte*

Dear Charlotte,

It's impolite to make deductions to someone about their personal life. You didn't answer my question because you are embarrassed at the idea that anyone you're interested in won't be likewise interested in you. You threw excuses at me, because you'd rather not think about why

that is, nor do you want to change yourself to attract more male attention (Good on you. I'd be sorely disappointed in you if you did).

See?

*Love,
Mycroft*

PS: Mummy tells me she's sending you extra money each week to purchase makeup and clothing. Please tell me you aren't ordering dangerous chemicals to experiment with.

Dear Mycroft,

I haven't told Mother yet that you prefer the company of men. If you don't tell, I won't.

*Love,
Charlotte*

PS: Don't worry, I bought a chemistry book first. I know what I'm doing.

--

When she is sixteen, pictures spread through the school of the headmaster dressed as a woman. He is wearing a wig and a dress, and kissing another man. The ensuing uproar seems rather excessive, all things considered. The parents call for his resignation, which he tenders immediately. The students titter about it in the halls, and it becomes the butt of many a joke.

Her mother offers to pull her out of school, because a school like that can't possibly be good for her darling baby daughter, and Charlotte considers it for a moment, because it is a good excuse.

But she'll be going to uni soon, and there's nowhere else she'd *rather* be.

--

Transvestism goes to the end of her research queue. It's months before she finally gets to reading about it, but when she does, it's *fascinating*.

There are words and diagnoses and procedures. There are case studies and novels and an entire *subculture* of people she's never thought about before. She devours it all with more than her usual thirst for knowledge, branching out and picking up supplementary material instead of just consuming and discarding the basics.

It's not as interesting as chemistry, but it's by far the closest a non-science has got. She doesn't even realize how much she's learned, until she searches for more and finds nothing new remaining.

What would you do if you were born female? Do you think about it? She writes in a letter to Mycroft, though they exchange letters now only a few times per year. *It's for a case, of sorts.*

I don't know. I never thought about it. Is your former headmaster a corpse now?

Case study. Though I haven't ruled out the probability of suicide within the next year or so. But that would be boring, she responds, but doesn't say anything more on the matter.

She hadn't realized people didn't think about it.

What, ever? Was that the norm?

--

She thinks about it for far longer than she feels she ought to. It feels like poking a loose tooth with her tongue.

There are words for people who want to change sexes, transsexual being one of the nicer ones. They boast a truly frighteningly high suicide rate. The world knows plenty about men who want to become women, but women who want to become men also exist -- they're just harder to see, because the treatment is rather effective.

There are surgeries for it, which are expensive but are not outside the realm of reason, considering how much she's spent the past year on her experiments. Women who become men are virtually impossible to distinguish from normal men.

Hormones are more effective when the subject is young, but fetuses start out generally female, and continue to look female until the introduction of androgens. The introduction of estrogen to a body doesn't do nearly as many permanent things as testosterone on a body does.

She finds it in the ICD-9, under code 302.85: Gender Identity Disorder in Adolescents or Adults, and also in the DSM-III-R, under Gender Identity Disorder.

She doesn't mention her research to anyone.

--

She throws herself into her work. Most of it is research, but she also has several cases, sent to her by her brother. He lets her know about interesting ones, and has really become very good at finding the ones with the best twists or the most mysterious circumstances. Any time outside of the work is spent training.

She learns martial arts, and lockpicking, and pickpocketing, and how to forge signatures. She finishes her practice in *that* field by writing Mycroft a letter entirely in his handwriting, then signing it "Mycroft Holmes". His response is measured and controlled, but she entertains herself by imagining the look that must have been on his face when he'd read it.

She eats as often as she remembers and barely ever notices that when she does, she's always by herself.

--

Mycroft addresses her as Sherlock sometimes, in his letters. He is the only one who knows Sherlock and Charlotte are the same, and he does it as an inside joke, to remind her of the shared secret between them.

She likes it. It feels nice, like putting on a long, warm coat in the middle of winter. She likes the way the police officers address her -- *Mr: H*, sometimes, or *lad* from the ones who know she's still in secondary school.

Look, son, we can't search the wife's flat without having more evidence, one had written to her. *If you can find anything on your own, give it to us and we'll see what we can do.*

If she could, she'd rather be Sherlock.

--

"Mummy thinks you're a lesbian," Mycroft mentions when she is seventeen and still hasn't had a proper boyfriend, or even a first kiss. He doesn't look as she remembers him. He's older now, and shorter (that's not true, it's she who's grown; she's six feet tall when wearing shoes). He is going through her suitcase, and has already found the first false bottom, where she keeps the newspaper clippings that mention Sherlock.

"You know I'm not," she says, and goes through his as well, examining his belongings. His 'minor government position' is not nearly so minor as he'd like her to believe. "Mummy thinks you're dating your secretary."

"Am I?"

She looks at him. "No. Your secretary's a woman."

"I date women."

"Not when you're sleeping with their brothers, you don't," she says, and grins at his startled expression. Obvious, from his brand of shampoo, which was nicer than Mycroft cared about and also not a scent he preferred.

"You should smile more, Sherry," Mycroft remarks rather than explain himself, and her grin turns into a scowl. "Since when did you get so unhappy? You should enjoy your youth -- everything gets more complicated once you're an adult."

--

She doesn't know why she's unhappy. She just... she doesn't like herself, her body, the way it looks. It's pretty enough, in a feminine sort of way. It's fit, and her muscle memory -- for combat, for the violin, for archery, is superb.

But.

But she looks in the mirror and she thinks, *This isn't who I want to be.*

She doesn't know why, and that bothers her the most.

--

She goes to Oxford for uni. It is an opportunity for a fresh start.

She vows to do things differently, to force herself to make friends. She'd *like* to have friends, really. It's just that they're so much effort, and it's boring to maintain their relationship.

She shares her suite with a girl from Surrey. Her name is Samantha; she goes by Sam. For an instant, Charlotte feels a quick twist of envy, but it fades. Sam is blond and petite and has more breasts than brains. Charlotte is virtually her exact opposite, aside from the fact that they are both studying Chemistry.

She makes an effort, this time.

She's better now at knowing what people expect her to say, what they want her to say. So she smiles and shakes Sam's hand and makes small talk about her family. She listens to Sam talk about her three sisters and makeup and parties and how much she's looking forward to having a good time at uni.

Mostly, Charlotte's looking forward to their library, and to being somewhere that no one knows her.

--

It is safer to be a man alone at night than to be a woman, she tells herself, and the need to go out and see things for herself -- to examine the difference between soil on campus and soil at the edges of town or near a market area, or to sit somewhere unobserved and see what she can deduce by a man's gait, his shoes, his coat, is strong.

That's why she does it, she tells herself.

She cuts her hair, because it tangles and she's had the same hair style for so long (admittedly, because she can't be bothered to do anything other than hack off the ends when they're too long) that she's eager for a change.

A tight blouse, plus a shirt on top of that, plus a coat on top of that, plus a scarf whose ends fall over her chest, and she looks sufficiently androgynous to pass for a man, if she doesn't open her mouth.

She goes out as Sherlock while she conducts experiments and it makes her heart pound like she's doing something dangerous and amazing. She likes the way the world changes when she becomes Sherlock. She likes the way she looks, masculine and tall and cold, like nothing anyone says can hurt her.

She tells herself that the enjoyment she gets from it is just the enjoyment of a disguise well-made.

--

She takes up smoking because she likes the way it makes her voice sound, low and gruff.

--

Her mother does not approve of the haircut. Charlotte doesn't especially care. She likes the way it makes her face look, angular instead of round, showing off the sharpness of her cheekbones.

"Charlotte, sweetheart," she laments when Charlotte has come home for the winter hols. She wrings her hands together. "Why did you cut off all your beautiful hair?"

"Why? Don't you like it?" she asks with false innocence and reads the answer in the cant of her mother's lips, the glance she throws her husband, and the way her lips purse tightly. Her mother hates it and thinks it will reflect poorly on their parenting.

"You don't look proper," her mother says, looking as if she might cry.

Her mother buys her a gown because family is coming for Christmas dinner, and she doesn't want to be ashamed of her only daughter. And though the thought of wearing a gown makes something inside her clench and squirm unhappily, she agrees to wear it if she can wear whatever she likes at the other times, because there are weeks yet before she returns to uni.

--

Mycroft is wearing a suit. He is on their mother's side.

"Traitor," she says, and looks at the reflection of his suit in the window. It's well-cut, tailored to his measurements. It makes him look very handsome.

Sherlock, she thinks, would look dashing in a suit. They'd emphasize his long legs, while still being loose enough to hide the extra fat around his hips. If he wore a sports bra (she has a few) and an undershirt, his coat would do the rest in hiding his breasts.

He'd look *sharp*. She wants to look like that.

But she can't explain having a man's suit in her belongings, so she can't have one. There are a lot of things she can't, because of that -- things she can't have because she doesn't want people to know about her.

"Really, Sherry," Mycroft says, and runs a hand through her hair -- it still curls, but not in the same way it did before. The cut is distinctly masculine. And, admittedly, uneven in the back, in a bad way, and the sides are different lengths. "Did you have to?"

"You can't tell me what to do," she says, and makes a face at him.

"Here, you did it all wrong," he says finally, and guides her to the bathroom adjoining his room. "If you're going to look inappropriate, then you might as well look good while you're doing so."

He fixes the edges and the back with a pair of scissors, hands gentle. When he finishes, he pushes her head under the sink and massages her scalp while rinsing out all the stray fragments of hair. "You have to keep up appearances, Sherry," he says. "I know this is an experiment you're running, but you need to be more subtle. You've upset Mummy and you know how badly it affects her health."

"I like my hair short," she says. She rubs bits of hair from her ears and shakes out her shirt.

"It's not feminine."

That was the point of it. But she doesn't say that. Even thinking it too loudly is a bad idea when her brother is around. "It doesn't get in my way as often, and it's easier to wash."

Mycroft sighs, long-suffering, and hands her a towel. "As long as you wear the gown for Christmas dinner, I suppose Mummy will consider it a fair trade. Everyone likes to see you dressed up."

She doesn't like to see herself dressed up. She rubs her hair dry vigorously, then cards through it with her fingers. It's much nicer than needing a brush to undo the mess of tangles her longer hair had always become after a washing. "Do I have to?"

"Unfortunately, my dear Sherry, yes. But if you suffer through it without causing a scene, you may come to my room when everyone's left."

It is a very tempting offer.

"Fine," she says. "But I won't like it."

--

Dinner is about as terrible as she'd expected. She hates the dress. She looks willowy, delicate, and just a little bit vapid (because of the makeup her mother had insisted on). She'd vetoed the high heels, but her shoes are light and elegant (too flimsy to step into the grass without dirtying them; what a waste).

Her aunts mourn her hair, her cousins are small and underfoot, and everyone compliments her on how pretty she looks. And she knows she should like it, that the thought should warm her, but each time it just makes something inside her deeply, deeply uncomfortable.

She doesn't care about being pretty. She cares about being *smart*.

But whenever she opens her mouth to say something cutting, she remembers Mycroft and her promise.

Just this once, she promises herself. Just this once, and I'll never let myself be paraded around like this again. And if Mycroft has a problem with that, he can go fuck himself.

She catches a glimpse herself in one of the mirrors that line the room and she *hates* her reflection with a vehemence that surprises her. She looks wrong -- awkward and

uncomfortable and unhappy. *I don't want to be that woman*, she thinks, but she doesn't let it bleed into her actions.

She pastes a polite smile on her face and bites her tongue.

--

"Changed out of the dress?" Mycroft asks around his toothbrush when she picks the lock of his bedroom door. He's already dressed in his pajamas, and is almost done brushing his teeth. She's in her pajamas as well.

"The dress was terrible," she says with feeling. "Too tight and everyone kept staring at me. I hate being stared at like that. I'm not some exotic animal in a zoo."

Mycroft makes a noise around his toothbrush, then spits into the sink. "If you wore dresses more often, they would have stared less. Most interesting thing you found out?"

She lies in the middle of his bed and tugs the blankets over herself, then pulls one of the pillows under her head. "Uncle Edward is getting ready to leave his second wife because his mistress is pregnant, but it might not be his child. He doesn't know that last part of course."

Mycroft climbs into the bed next to her, and pushes her to the side. "Don't hog my bed. Why must you sprawl so?"

She snickers when she presses her chilled feet to his thigh and he shrieks. "What did *you* find out?"

"Clarice, the child -- the one in the pink dress, who kept following her two sisters around? The older one uses her as a distraction while shoplifting."

They trade deductions. She has some pieces that he hasn't observed and vice versa, though he can also predict what they will do next, something she's not as good at. She generally doesn't make predictions, but Mycroft announces them with ease. She's found him to be right significantly more often than not.

They used to be close enough that he would tell her about his life, about his friends and his day and himself. They're not that close anymore, and she misses it.

"What are you doing?" she whispers softly, when they have both closed their eyes in preparation for falling asleep. "With yourself, I mean."

"I'm going to take over the world, one day," he says with equal softness. "I'll be responsible for all the decisions, and nothing will happen that I can't influence. I'll control everything. What are you doing? What do you want?"

Something inside her shies away from the question. "I don't know yet," she says, but she thinks she might be lying.

--

There are things that she wants, things she's always wanted, that she'd thought were impossible. You can't change something that's already happened. And, maybe she's wrong, maybe she just doesn't believe women are truly equal to men, and that's the problem. Maybe she just has low self-esteem caused by having no friends during her prime socialization years, and thinks that being a boy would have fixed it.

It doesn't make any sense. Sex is just the body. The body is just transport for the mind. She's above the demands of her body, so *why does she want to change it?*

And even if she *does* want to be male, what does it matter? She can't actually change her chromosomes, just force her body into a facsimile of masculinity.

It's costly and inconvenient and not really that big of a deal, because even as a woman, she's sure she can get her way and do what she wants with minimal interference from others. It wouldn't even be much of a difference, because it's not as if trying to change it would do that much.

Also, it would really, really upset her mother.

And the rest of her family, except possibly Mycroft, who might very well know about this already.

It would mean paperwork, followed by awkwardness during the in-between time when she'd have to explain to everyone that yes, her real name was Sophie, and yes, that meant she was really a girl (and even thinking that hurts), and it can't possibly be worth the time investment.

She's probably not even, not really, because she pretty clearly prefers men (not that she hasn't considered women, but she just isn't as interested), and why would she want to be gay and a freak if she could just be heterosexual and normal?

Everyone would know. It would be humiliating. She'd probably regret it right after. If she's this uncertain, she shouldn't do things to her body that can't be undone. It makes sense, the most sense, to do nothing.

It's undoubtedly the best choice. Voluntarily making things difficult for herself doesn't make any sense.

So why does she want it so much?

--

She thinks about her future and it's frighteningly, terrifyingly *blank*. She doesn't know who she wants to be, five years from now. She doesn't know where she wants to live, or who she wants to know, or what she wants to do. All she knows is that she doesn't want to *this*, whatever it is she has now.

She tells herself it'll change. She tells herself that *she'll* change, that one day she will see herself in the mirror or reflected in the eyes of someone else, and think, *yes, this is me. This is who I am.*

She can't see it happening, no matter how hard she tries.

--

He gives up arguing with himself about it, eventually.

--

He signs his correspondences to the police as Sherlock H, as he always has, and he signs his letters to his family as SH. They can take what they will from the S. He signs his school assignments S. Holmes, and manages to get away with it because he is the only Holmes in his classes.

It is a small, trivial sign of defiance, to not write the name "Sophie Holmes", especially when he still answers to it. But he does it anyway.

--

Sebastian thinks he's a girl but Sherlock still likes him because aside from that, he puts up with the rest of it pretty well. He is annoyed when Sherlock deduces at him (he can't help it, really; part of him always jumps at the opportunity to show off) but tries to hide it.

He invites Sherlock to have lunch with him.

Sherlock accepts, on a whim.

And he's not naive, per se, but just because he knows about the phenomenon of reciprocal liking doesn't mean he's immune to it.

Seb is not too stupid. Sherlock's pretty sure if he tried, he'd be able to be moderately entertaining, which does put him ahead of the rest.

He doesn't try to pay for Sherlock's lunch, even though it seems to be a date. Seb is dressed slightly more formally than usual, though Sherlock's just in his standard jeans and a men's shirt and a coat that's two sizes too large.

He buys more men's clothes now, keeps them in with the rest of his belongings; he's been taking jobs as Sherlock, mostly solving petty thefts or writing term papers for a modest fee to help fund his experiments. His clients, the ones that aren't his fellow students, are always surprised at how young he looks. His face is too round, and his voice too high. He looks like a child. It likely doesn't help that he's actually only eighteen.

Seb is shorter than him, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by that. He offers Sherlock his arm with a teasing grin; Sherlock shoves it away, but finds himself smiling as well.

--

One date becomes two, becomes three. Soon Sherlock finds himself loitering outside Seb's classes, waiting for him to come out, or sitting with him in the library, doing problem sets together. He can't actually tell if Seb is using him for his body (he's taking things slower than

the norm for college relationships, probably slower than Seb is used to) or his academic prowess (Sherlock can't help but correct his papers, because they are written with the skill of a five-year-old making doodles in crayon).

But Seb's warm and pleasing to be around, and while he's displeased at the way Sherlock disappears for days sometimes (he goes out of town as Sherlock to investigate things, having already turned in any upcoming assignments, because he gets bored and the alternative would be to cause trouble rather than search for it), he doesn't pry for more information.

--

Dear Charlotte,

Mummy says you're seeing someone: a fellow named Sebastian. Congratulations! This is your first boyfriend, isn't it? Does he treat you well? I'm glad to see you're making friends. Congratulations on your marks as well, though I'd expected no less from you. Mummy's ecstatic.

*Yours,
Mycroft Holmes*

Dear Mycroft,

He's alright. A bit dull, but I'm used to that. I'm also friends with my roommate, thank you very much. I'm perfectly capable of making friends if I put in the effort. I just don't waste as much time on it as you do. Mummy is more ecstatic at the idea that I have found a man to take care of me than she'd ever be regarding my marks.

How are you? Taken over the world yet?

*Yours,
SH*

--

Seb introduces Sherlock to his friends as "Charlotte my girlfriend". Sherlock forces a polite grin and plays nicely with them for a while, but swiftly becomes bored. They're supposed to be "hanging out" before exams. It is a pub he's been to before, but not one he's gone as Charlotte to.

"You're cheating on your girlfriend," he says to Mark, who is one of Seb's best friends. Mark's girlfriend, who is sitting next to him, makes an angry sound. Mark turns red.

"I am not!" He protests. Sherlock wonders if he'd ever turned that red when angry. Mycroft never has (though Mycroft rarely gets angry, so his sample size is small), but Seb does, sometimes, when Sherlock is in a bad mood and being particularly hard to get along with. He hopes he never looks like that. It's terribly unattractive.

"You are," he says calmly, and points to Mark's hand, which has a spot of paint near the fingernails. "You're studying biology. Your girlfriend studies philosophy, but you were recently having sex with someone in an art room. Your girlfriend's been busy with her schoolwork, obviously, since she's still carrying about the source material for the paper she's writing, so it can't have been her."

He turns to the girlfriend. "Do you know any art students? Female, dark hair, shorter than him but taller than you, long nails?"

Turns out, she does, but it ends up being a different one giving her boyfriend blow jobs in the art room, because he confesses the whole thing once he's called out, much to the uncomfortableness of the circular table.

"You're kind of a huge bitch," the girlfriend says viciously to him afterwards, when Seb and the other men leave to collect more drinks.

Sherlock says, "Wouldn't you rather know before you proposed? You keep looking at his hands," he explains before she opens her mouth to ask why he knows that. "His ring finger in particular. Also, the ring's in your purse and you touch it when nervous."

"That's creepy," the girlfriend says flatly.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

--

"Charlotte, did you really have to do that?" Seb asks, when he walks Sherlock back to his room.

"Mmm, no. But I was bored," Sherlock replies, with a careless shrug. "I did try, though."

"You get bored so easily," Seb says, but his voice is amused now, indulgent. He opens the door for Sherlock. "Is your roommate in?"

"No, she's out for the rest of the weekend," Sherlock replies and Seb slides in after him, hands already tugging at his coat, sliding underneath his shirt. "Must you always maul me so?" He huffs a laugh and helps Seb take off their clothes.

Seb's not terrible at sex, as far as he can tell. It's more fun than masturbation at least, and Sherlock enjoys the physical closeness even if it feels strange, just a little. But he's had this body for years, and he knows how to use it, even if it doesn't feel like *him*.

--

That summer, he doesn't tell his parents, because he's afraid.

He hates being afraid.

Mycroft knows he's hiding something but not what it is. When he asks, Sherlock refuses to tell him. But he acts no different than he normally does and there are no easy hints for

Mycroft to deduce what's wrong with him.

"Haven't broken up with Sebastian yet, I see," Mycroft says, and nibbles on a biscuit.

"Not yet," Sherlock agrees. He doesn't like being at home. It feels strange. His mother keeps trying to ask him how serious he is about Seb (the answer being "not very", but that's not what she wants to hear and he doesn't want to deal with it). "I like him."

"Not very much, you don't," Mycroft observes. "You've been pretending you're a man."

I'm not pretending, Sherlock thinks, but that's not what he says. What he says is, "Have you ever seen an 18-year-old girl talking to drug dealers in dark alleys? What do you think happens to them after?"

Mycroft makes a face. "You needn't go tramping about in so many places, Sherry. That's what other people are for. You can get the same information from reading reports someone else brings you."

"Yes, but where's the fun in that? Besides, there's no one I'd trust more than myself to make the necessary observations."

"Must you?"

"Yes, I think so," Sherlock says, and Mycroft looks dubious. Sherlock distracts him by noticing out loud that Mycroft has gained ten pounds recently, thanks to his desk job.

Mycroft retaliates by making a point of calling him Charlotte at every opportunity.

--

The next year is better, because he gets a flat on his own and introduces himself to the neighbors as Sherlock Holmes. He binds his chest whenever he goes out and no one questions him despite how high his voice still is.

The only problem is telling Seb.

Or, well, the real problem is that he *doesn't* tell Seb, just starts avoiding him. Seb doesn't find him until two weeks into the term, when they pass each other while going to their respective classes.

Seb grabs his arm. "*Charlotte?* Where've you been? You haven't answered my calls."

"I'm going by Sherlock now," Sherlock says, and pulls his arm free.

"Sherlock?" Seb says, sounding puzzled. "What kind of a name is Sherlock?"

"Look, I -- Let's not discuss this here," he says, then offers reluctantly, "Did you want to get some coffee?"

"I want to know why my girlfriend's been avoiding me. If you wanted to break up with me, you could have just said so," Seb says, voice rising, and several students cast glances at them (at him).

"There's no need to cause a scene," Sherlock says, and takes Seb's arm. "Let's go."

--

"So you want to be a man?"

I am a man, Sherlock thinks. But what he says is, "Essentially, yes. I go by Sherlock, and want to be treated as a man."

"But you're not," Seb points out, and looks so very, very confused as he nurses his cup of tea. "You're a girl -- I know you're a girl. We've had sex."

Sherlock sighs. "Yes, Sebastian. But I'm a man *now*, and I'll thank you to treat me like one."

"Is this because you're gay?" he asks suspiciously. "You don't want to be a lesbian, so you're going to get a sex change?"

Right. That's enough talking to idiots for today, Sherlock thinks, and clenches his teeth. He stands up.

"Stop worrying about sexuality," he says. "*You're* bisexual with a preference for men. That's why you were attracted to me in the first place, but you're too afraid to admit it because you know your father will disapprove of you. *I* am still exclusively attracted to men, which makes me *homosexual*. My gender has nothing to do with you and it is not up for negotiation."

"I won't be your boyfriend if you're going to tell everyone you're a man," Seb says, watching Sherlock put on his coat.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Yes, I know. I've already made my decision. I thought that was already clear."

--

Later, Seb will apologize to him for being a git, and they will be friends again, but it will be strange. And even later, he will join Seb and some of his mates for drinks, as a man, and no one will question it or assume they are dating.

But afterwards, they'll go back to Sherlock's flat, and Seb will run his hands over Sherlock's arms, and his waist, and his neck, and he will whisper "*Sherlock*" thoughtfully. And Sherlock will push him against the wall, and drop to his knees, and take him in his mouth.

And afterwards, Sebastian will say self-consciously, "It wasn't really gay; you're not a real man."

And Sherlock will punch him in the jaw and say, "If you ever say I'm not a real man again, I'm telling everyone about the gay pornographic magazines you hide under your bed."

--

He tells his family because he can't bear the thought of pretending to be Charlotte again.

--

Mycroft doesn't understand, but Sherlock wasn't expecting him to.

"Sherry," he says, and then, "Sherlock," when Sherlock scowls at him. "What's this about, really?"

His voice is too gentle. He's soft around the edges from the years of government work, and somewhere between when Sherlock realized he could never go to Eton, and when Mycroft realized he could take over the world but only if he looked as if he followed everyone's expectations, Sherlock realizes that they had stopped being best friends.

"I just want to do what I want," he says, rather than explain himself. "Do we have to talk about it today?"

"We'll have to talk about it eventually," Mycroft comments. "But I suppose not today. Mummy's fairly angry at you, though. I don't know how long it'll take before she forgives you."

"I don't care if she ever forgives me."

--

He drops out of school at the end of the term because he can't afford to go, now that his family won't pay for it.

This doesn't bother him.

What bothers him is that his mother makes Mycroft pass on her letters, which always start with *Dear Charlotte*, and involve some sort of insinuation that he's doing this just to spite her and that he needs to come back and get treatment for his illness.

He doesn't know why he reads them at all, but it feels very satisfying to burn them.

--

All his legal documents name him as Sophie and the marker for his sex is F. Technically, this is accurate, because sex and gender are not the same, and his sex *is* female.

So when he rents a flat in Cardiff, he presents himself as a woman and hates every minute of it. He gets a job and quits within the week because his boss touches his knee and tells him he'd look so much lovelier if he wore a skirt. The next two jobs go much the same way.

By the time six months have passed, he is out of money and not sure what he's doing with himself, so he goes back to his family with his metaphorical tail between his legs.

He spends three months talking to a psychiatrist who is *clearly* incompetent. He sees she have no idea what she's talking about within a week, and spends the rest of the time alternately antagonizing and deceiving her, just to make the hours pass by more quickly.

He ends up getting nothing out of it except for a *painfully* inaccurate sociopathy diagnosis that his parents seem to eat up. His mother especially would like to think that he's doing "that silly pretending to be a man thing" just to spite her.

He's not actually on speaking terms with his father right now, so Sherlock doesn't know what he thinks.

Mycroft, on the other hand, thinks he's being kind by trying to talk to Sherlock, but the condescension is really quite off-putting. Sherlock knows Mycroft is just humoring him, can tell that Mycroft sees him as "my confused baby sister who I need to protect and take care of", and while he does still love Mycroft, it's enough to make him want to commit fratricide.

So he leaves, because he'd rather be living in the street than putting up with this.

--

He finds a smaller, cheaper flat and puts his deductive skills to use as a detective, making contacts through word of mouth and usually scraping by with just enough money to pay the rent. When he doesn't have enough, he picks pockets until he has does.

He solves a case of stolen jewelery (so boringly common) and uses the reward to pay for hormones, which is wonderful and terrifying all at once.

The fact that he's getting them illegally is really immaterial, in comparison (and he's perfectly competent, capable of testing to ensure it is, in fact, what he's been told). But before injecting himself, he checks it -- repeatedly, carefully, with more care than he's given the cocaine he puts irregularly into his veins when he needs to be away from himself.

Soon, he needs to shave. He can see the bristles on his face, can feel them rough against the pad of his thumb. The first time he does it, he laughs -- well into his twenties, and shaving for the first time. He'd never shaved before, when he'd been presenting as a woman -- not his legs, and not under his arms, because he'd never seen the point. There'd never been any need. He'd always worn as many clothes as he could, to obscure his figure.

He uses a safety razor and still manages to look like he lost a fight with an angry sheet of paper (or a dozen).

But when he looks into the mirror, his face won't stop grinning.

--

Several months later, Sherlock comes home to find Mycroft looking through his flat.

"What are you doing here?" Sherlock asks. He feels a deep satisfaction when Mycroft visibly jumps at the sound of Sherlock's voice, deeper than it was before and still dropping.

"You've been taking testosterone," Mycroft says with a displeased frown, and taps the floor with the umbrella held in his left hand. "How did you even get it? Is it at least human?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Mostly. How did you find out where I live?"

"You signed the lease as Sophie Holmes," Mycroft says mildly, and Sherlock knows his brother has noticed the slight wince he'd made when he'd heard the name. "There aren't very many Sophie Holmeses in London."

"My name's Sherlock," he corrects.

"I remember. I remember when you picked it, even."

"What do you want?" Why did he even bother asking? Mycroft was clenching the umbrella, his lips were pursed. He was staring at Sherlock's chest (bound, flat) and his jaw (unshaven, a day's worth of stubble). He hasn't made contact with Sherlock since he'd left home for the second time, and now is meeting him in person, having already broken into his flat.

So Mycroft wants something from him, and it has to be important, too important to send an email or make a call. Sherlock has a website with his name on it, and he sincerely doubts Mycroft is too stupid to look him up, especially if he can find Sherlock's address from a supposedly private lease.

"Neither of our parents are in ill health," Sherlock says and strips off his gloves. He shrugs out of his coat, and takes off his shoes. "What could they possibly need me for?"

Mycroft makes a face as if remembering something deeply unpleasant. "Christmas dinner," he says. "Mother misses you. As do I."

"You've had years to contact me, Mycroft. And I'm not going to Christmas dinner. I've had enough masquerading as a female for the first two decades of my life. I've no interest in doing it again."

"Sherry, don't be like that," Mycroft says, and Sherlock throws a paperweight at his face. Mycroft catches it, of course.

"Don't call me Sherry. My name is Sherlock."

"Sherlock, then. We miss you. Even if you don't want to be a girl anymore, the family misses you and you're still blood. You've kept the surname, I see."

"It was too much effort to change," Sherlock lies. "You also wanted to see how I'm doing," he observes, but that's easy to figure out. It's obvious, from the way Mycroft looks around the flat, examines Sherlock, as if he can deduce everything about the last few years. "I'm fine. I'm happier now than I've ever been."

"You never seemed unhappy when we were children."

"I was always unhappy, but I never knew why," he admits, and Mycroft looks sorrowful. "Now get out."

"Come to Christmas dinner."

But Sherlock has the ace up his sleeve in this conversation, and he knows it, because, "Only if I don't have to pretend to be a girl."

"It's not pretending. You *are* a girl. You never exhibited any of the classical signs of Gender Identity Disorder --"

"I bloody well did! I hated everything about having a female body and being treated like a girl and if you hadn't been blinded by uni and then your job, you'd have seen it! But you've kept your position this long, so I suppose it must be important."

The *more important than me* is unspoken.

"Now get out," Sherlock says. "You've heard my terms."

Mycroft sighs. "I worry about you, *Sherlock*. I'm your older brother. That has to count for something."

"If you can get mother to let me go as a man, then I'll go."

She doesn't agree.

Sherlock ignores the rest of Mycroft's calls, until they eventually trickle to a stop.

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The drugs start because he's bored, because his funds are finite and his space is finite, which means the number of experiments he can keep are disappointingly limited. The first time is because he's curious. When he's high, when there's enough of it in his veins, he can't feel his body.

He can't feel the ever-present wrongness that distracts him, doesn't see himself in the mirror and think, *bones too delicate, jaw too rounded*. He forgets, momentarily, that he'd been born *wrong*, and for him, forgetting is something that comes rarely.

It's not the same as being focused, at having a challenge to solve, at picking up dozens of disparate facts and deducing them down to reveal the truth of a mystery.

But it's good, and it helps him when he remembers that he'll never be biologically male, that his chromosomes will always read XX, no matter what he does to his body or his records.

As far as bad, self-destructive habits go, it's not too egregious. He still has the work, can calculate dosages easily to leave himself with his wits when he needs them. He runs rings around anyone he associates with -- clients and contacts and even the slightly darker contacts he uses when the normal ones don't suffice.

--

He overdoses exactly once, while chasing a high that doesn't get him *high* enough, that doesn't divorce him from his (*permanentlywrong*) body until he adds a handful of other substances, each one worse than the previous, and manages to accidentally mix two things that oughtn't be mixed.

He wakes in hospital, feeling like shit. There's an IV in his arm. His breasts aren't bound, and he's been changed out of his clothes (the knowledge that someone's undressed him makes an ice-cold coil of fear wrap around his chest, because he hates that, hates people looking at him and seeing *her*).

Mycroft is in a chair -- a plush, comfortable-looking leather one that clearly doesn't belong to the hospital -- at his bedside, reading a file. Sherlock's medical file, most likely. He looks up when Sherlock stirs. From his rumpled state, and the way the flesh settles on his cheekbones, he's lost three to five pounds, recently.

"Charlotte," he says seriously, "You need to stop doing this to yourself."

Sherlock's surprised at the depth of his reaction, at the sheer *strength* of the rage he feels at Mycroft's words. "I'd sooner die," he snaps without thinking.

Mycroft flinches with his entire body.

"You very well *might*!" He snaps. "What you're doing isn't *safe* and the changes you're making to your body are irreversible! I thought you'd tire of this game, but you clearly haven't, and it's has gone on long enough."

Sherlock rips the IV out and forces himself into a sitting position. The sudden movement makes the room spin dizzily around him, but he stays upright out of sheer force of will. "I don't care what you say," he says. "I got this far without anyone's help, and I'm not going to stop now."

"And now you're a drug addict and a transsexual. Do you have any consideration for how upset you've made Mummy?"

"*She's* the one who said I wasn't welcome in the house anymore," Sherlock says. "I'm doing this with or without any of you, even if it kills me. I'd *rather* it killed me, than go back to how it was before."

Mycroft's face crumples and once, the sight would have broken Sherlock's heart. But now, all he feels is satisfaction at making Mycroft hurt as much as he has. "Charlotte --"

"Don't *call* me that!"

"I'm not indulging your whims any longer. Do you know how I heard what happened to you? I got a call. A phone call, *at work*, from the hospital telling me you were in critical condition and they'd found traces of nearly a dozen drugs in your system. They weren't sure you were going to *live*."

"I wish I hadn't," Sherlock mutters rebelliously, but this time he doesn't mean it, and they both know it.

"You're ruining your life."

"I don't care. You can't stop me."

Mycroft sighs. "The drugs, at least. You need to get clean."

He can't, not yet. The drugs are the only thing that make him feel... not right, but at least not *wrong*. He *needs* them. And they help with other things, with focusing his mind on the work, on the cases and the knowledge and on being *right*, in at least this one little way.

"I'm not here to fight with you," Mycroft says. "I just wanted to see that you were all right, and to try talking you into seeing reason, if possible."

Sherlock wonders where the doctors are. Mycroft's influence has grown so strong that he can prevent them coming in, but through what means? Distraction, or has he the power to threaten jobs now?

"I'm being perfectly reasonable," he says. "What happened with the drugs was a miscalculation, *as you well know*, and I'm not changing any of the rest."

"There's nothing I can do to change your mind," Mycroft says. It's not a question.

Sherlock doesn't hesitate. "Not in this."

Mycroft stands, leaning his weight on his thin black umbrella. "I'll arrange for your allowance to be reinstated," he says. "It'll be the same account as it's always been. Use it for anything you need, except drugs. Move into a better flat. Get clean."

"This doesn't change anything," Sherlock tells him. "I'll never forgive you," *for not taking me seriously, for not helping me, for siding with our parents instead of me, for not being there when I needed you*, "no matter what you do."

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Sherlock undertakes the necessary surgeries but uses the rest of the money sparingly, letting the deposits build up over time. He draws from it only when he must, when he would otherwise have to choose between paying for food and paying the rent.

Every pound he uses from the account feels like a concession, like another thing Mycroft can hold over his head as proof he can't handle things on his own. Each withdrawal feels like a noose tightening around his neck, a reminder him that he *owes* his family, that he's a source of disappointment and shame.

I don't care, he tells himself when he depresses the plunger of the syringe, injecting another dosage of testosterone into his muscles. *It's not their choice. I don't owe them anything. This is who I am.*

The guilt gnaws at him anyway, reminding him each time he sees his reflection that he'd had to choose between his family and himself, that he's giving up his past to give himself a future.

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Eventually, the guilt goes away.

He wakes up in the morning and doesn't dread getting dressed and going outside. He can see himself in the mirror without hating how he looks. He goes weeks without thinking about dying, about nothingness, about injecting a painless poison in his veins and closing his eyes to find out what happens *next*.

He has connections -- for drugs, for information, for work and supplies to conduct his experiments. They call him Sherlock, or sometimes Holmes. The women flirt with him, giggling when he speaks or leaning too close when he draws near. The men laugh with him, offering him beer and drugs and girls (he accepts the first two, but declines the last). Or they punch him, but he's all right with that. He turns out to be a better fighter than most.

He dares to grow his hair long. It's not too long, just barely enough to curl, and even when he shaves his jaw smooth, no one looks at him askance, squinting as if they can determine his sex by staring long enough.

He has work. He has cocaine when there's no work to be had. Sometimes he goes hours (and once, nearly an entire day) without remembering, without looking down at himself and thinking, *this is as far as you've gone, and it's still not enough*, without talking to someone and knowing, *they'd hate you if they knew your secret*.

Sometimes he forgets that his father's disowned him, that his mother thinks he's sick, that his brother used to be his best friend and is now a stranger he barely recognizes.

In those times, he thinks he's happy.

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On April 5th, 2005, a man knocks on the door to Sherlock Holmes' flat, hands him a package, and tells him his brother would like very much for him to stop doing cocaine, please. Inside the package are a set of documents (driving license, passport, and more) for one Sherlock Holmes, born 1976, male.

There's also a Gender Recognition Certificate, which Sherlock doesn't even believe is real until he opens up his laptop and looks it up. And a prescription for testosterone, on top of several bottles the thing itself, neatly sealed.

Careful examination of the documents, cross-compared with the ones he already has (fake, of course, but done by the best forger he could both find and afford), shows that they might actually be *legal*. He replaces the forgeries in his wallet with the genuine ones. His hands are trembling.

There's no note, but Sherlock doesn't need one.

He and Mycroft haven't spoken in more than five years.

Sherlock's not quite sure what to think, or if he'll even accept the apology, but apparently Mycroft's plans of taking over the government are going pretty well. He's not sure how much of it, of the new laws, is Mycroft's doing.

Changing the legal system doesn't sound outside the realm of his influence. He is, after all, even more astute than Sherlock, without any mental disorders to interfere with his plans.

Sherlock rubs the puncture mark on the inside of his elbow. Perhaps his cocaine usage is a bit excessive.

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When Sherlock checks, all his school records have been destroyed in fires (except for the transcripts from his two years at university, where he is registered under Sherlock Holmes, male). His medical record is modified but mostly intact: Sherlock Holmes, sex: female, with approximate dates for the masectomy and hysterectomy neatly penciled in. How Mycroft knows this, he's not sure he wants to know.

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He celebrates his new legal status by doing a lot of cocaine, and comes down to himself in a jail cell, watched by a man with hints of gray at his temples. Not a guard but higher than a regular officer. He looks at Sherlock as if Sherlock's *said* something, something unwise.

"Could I get some water?" Sherlock asks, and sits up slowly. His mouth is dry. He wants to curl up in a bed and sleep for days.

"You said you knew where the bodies of the other missing girls are," the man says, face hard. "And that if we weren't so stupid, we'd have found them by now, because you were sloppy."

He frowns. "Because *I* was sloppy? I didn't kill any girls."

"The corpse we found begs to differ. You've already confessed."

"I didn't confess to anything," Sherlock says with a scowl, patching together the memories of the night before. "I knew where the bodies were because it was *obvious*."

"Well, you'll just have to excuse us if we hold you for questioning, Mr. Holmes," he says, and Sherlock can't suppress his automatic, pleased smile.

Mr. Holmes.

"You're in charge of the case. Well, I assure you, I'm not involved."

"We've got you in for drugs too. We found cocaine on you -- or are you going to say that wasn't yours either?"

"No, definitely mine," Sherlock admits, and settles in to wait. There'll be another murder within 72 hours and if he's in a holding cell when the girl goes missing, he'll be cleared of suspicion.

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He *is* cleared of suspicion. His cocaine is confiscated before his release, but that's fine; he doesn't need it anymore, he thinks, not with the potential of police work at his fingertips -- real work, challenging work.

He goes on to solve the case for them. Serial killers are much more interesting than petty thieves and arsonists, even though they all make the same rudimentary mistakes.

It takes three days, only because he'd needed to wait a day for his test results to develop. At the end of the third day, when the murderer is being led into a police car, the DI runs his hand through his hair. He offers his hand to Sherlock. "Thanks for the help," he says.

"It was a pleasure," Sherlock replies, because it *was*. "You have my number. Call me if you have any other interesting cases."

"You know," the DI says thoughtfully, "I just might."

The man -- the Inspector, Detective Inspector, even -- is named Gregory Lestrade and he thinks Sherlock is mad and possibly a psychopath. But he also thinks Sherlock's brilliant, which he is, and male, which he is, and that's... kind of nice.

Nice to have it be legitimate, to be who he is and not just another false identity matching the dozen others he's got in the safety deposit box at the bank, for if he ever needs to disappear or be someone else.

"Sherlock Holmes" *isn't* someone else, anymore.

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Sherlock doesn't get paid by Scotland Yard but his website's starting to get popular now, and there is no shortage of paying cases in his inbox. Even better, he has a legitimate passport now; his hands itch with the urge to take it out, to smooth his fingers over the letters. He can get into and out of other countries at will.

Even the boring cases are worth investigating, if they'll bring him somewhere different.

--

"A man kidnapped me today, Sherlock," Lestrade says when he lets himself into Sherlock's flat. He's got a key because Sherlock can't be bothered to answer the door and he doesn't want it getting kicked in if Lestrade comes to the conclusion that he's withholding evidence again.

"I'm on the balcony," Sherlock calls. When Lestrade joins him, he plucks Sherlock's cigarette from between his lips.

"That's mine," Sherlock points out darkly, but fishes another one out of the battered carton in his coat pocket. "What sort of man? How did you get free? You aren't injured."

"Tall, dark hair, holds an umbrella. Very well-dressed. Said his name was Mycroft."

Sherlock tenses. *Mycroft*. "Did he, now," he replies. "What did he want with you?"

"Funny, that." Lestrade takes a deep drag of the cigarette. He exhales a plume of smoke that curls lazily upwards. "He wanted to know what you were arrested for and why you kept coming by Scotland Yard."

"He already knows those things. He's put me under surveillance." There have been surveillance teams outside his flat for the past couple months now -- Sherlock had confronted one of them when he'd first noticed, but he'd said Mycroft was the one to send him.

As Mycroft is responsible for the regular post boxes of testosterone delivered to his doorstep, saving Sherlock the trouble of getting it himself (he has a prescription, he could get it legally, but that's *boring*), Sherlock had decided to leave it be, for now.

It'd be more effort than it's worth, he suspects, to get rid of the surveillance. Even without direct contact, Sherlock can tell that Mycroft's sphere of influence has grown by leaps and bounds and shows no signs of shrinking.

"He says he's your brother."

"He is," Sherlock acknowledges.

"You know, most brothers, if they want to check up on you, just call. He has your number, doesn't he?"

Sherlock nods warily. "He does. We haven't spoken in years. We had a falling-out."

There is a long pause, where Lestrade sucks the cigarette to ash and stubs it out on the railing. Smoke winds lazily around his face. "Is he dangerous? Do you need, ah, protection?"

Sherlock barks a laugh. "Nothing like that, rest assured, Inspector. He's dangerous but only on, I suspect, a global scale. You're not nearly important enough to be in danger from his manipulations." But that doesn't explain what Mycroft was *doing*. "What did he tell you?"

"That you were his younger brother, he worries about you, and he wants to know what you're doing at Scotland Yard."

Something in Sherlock's chest tightens abruptly. "He called me that? His younger brother? What did he say, exactly? *Exactly*."

Lestrade closes his eyes. "'Good evening, Inspector Lestrade. I noticed you've been bringing in a Sherlock Holmes to Scotland Yard, repeatedly. He's not being arrested,' something something, something, and then 'He's my younger brother, and I worry. Take care of him,'" he recites, in a passable imitation of Mycroft's crisp vowels. "He was very posh. But you are too, when you aren't trying not to be."

Oh. “Really, he said that?” Sherlock tries to suppress his grin, but finds that he can't.

“Focus on the kidnapping part,” Lestrade prompts but he grins back, even if he doesn't seem to know why.

“Oh, that. It's nothing. Probably just a bad habit he's picked up somewhere. If he, uh, does it again, you can tell him he hasn't got to worry, that I'm fine. I'm getting clean, and I'm fine.”

I'm fine.

He's said the phrase dozens of times but, Sherlock thinks, this might be the first time in his adult life that he's actually *meant* it.

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