Title: Caring Can Be An Advantage
Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)
Genre: Gen (non-slash)
Characters/Pairings: John, Sherlock
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Contains spoilers for all of season 3
Summary: Ever since Serbia, December was not a good month for Sherlock. Only this time, it wasn't going unnoticed.
Author's Note: This was written for an anonymous prompt on LiveJournal which said: *Sherlock has scars that hurt on cold days. Maybe Sherlock got properly stabbed sometime... shot... whatever. But the scars (preferably multiple) hurt when it's cold out and he's just that bit more miserable that tells John something's up*. I realize it's not a perfect fill in the literal sense of the prompt, but I hope it still captures the essence of the request.
Not sure I have the timeline right, but I guess there's certain room for artistic license, given the fact that we don't know how much time passed between "The Empty Hearse" and "The Sign of Three". Also not sure just how realistic the whole scenario is... But anyway, indulge me, okay?
At one point in the story, I'm alluding to a certain incident in Russia, which is actually taken from a fanfic that extricate wrote for an image prompt I posted in the comment-fic LJ comm. It's not important for my story that you know the fic, but if you're interested in reading it, you can find it on AO3 (it's very good and very angsty): http://archiveofourown.org/works/1222114
Thanks go out to Alipeeps for the beta and Willow for the advice. Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

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It always happened in December, and it always followed the same pattern.

Daylight waned much too early, which turned the nights into long, gloomy stretches that offered too much room for contemplation. Cold winter air made the Baker Street flat a less desirable place to live in when it seeped through the poor insulation of the windows. But usually it was the damp drizzle that often accompanied London's wintery moods which managed to find its way into Sherlock's soul to exploit that tiny hole in his defence that he'd failed to close off.

Sherlock was no stranger to discomfort. Most times, he found a way to dull physical pain either with drugs or with the help of the Mind Palace. But not in December. The outside world would put on the Christmas cheer by switching on tiny lights in flickering colours. Sherlock would watch it with disdain and grind his teeth at the irony of it all.

During the two years he'd tried to dismantle Moriarty's network, he hadn't allowed himself to give in to sentiment. It worked well at the time, gave him the resolve he needed, the detachment that was vital to his success.

He would grudgingly admit to himself that a version of John had been there along the way, on and off, to berate him if he'd been careless, to offer a helping hand when he needed to pick himself up, to compliment his brilliance if he'd been especially clever. He'd needed his own rendition of the man to get through it and come out the other end.

Sherlock had known from the start that it wasn't going to be easy, what a sacrifice it would be, but he hadn't realised just how hard it would be on both his body and his mind. Bruises and scrapes were a constant companion. The infected cut in his leg somewhere in the deepest recesses of Russia had been a challenge—to say the least. He knew now it had been touch and go there for a while. What remained of the experience now was a fading memory in flesh and mind, a receding red line on pale skin.

However, this wasn't his December problem. His December problem originated in Romania. He'd been more than careless; not so much in lack of attention paid to his adversaries, but in a sloppily plotted route and an unfortunate misstep in a dark building. It sent him crashing through the rotted wooden floor. Concrete broke his fall some six feet down, his shoulder bearing the brunt of his miscalculation.

A searing pain told him it was dislocated at the very least. Once his vision returned from the depth of a blackened haze, he'd scrambled in the dark with his arm cradled to his side to find a way out. Details of that particular day were sketchy, which he sometimes found frustrating, but he eventually managed to pop the bone back into the socket with a scream that he'd bottled up for the better part of a year.

In an ideal world, he'd have worn a sling until the aggravated tendons and muscles had recovered. Romania was far from an ideal world, and by the time he made his way into Serbia, the pain had gradually lessened to levels between barely there and fairly tolerable.

That winter had been the hardest of all. His version of John had become less insistent, less demanding. Sometimes he'd secretly wished that his conjured up John was more of a nuisance, because it became more and more difficult to tap into his depleted energy reserves.

Now back in London, there was distraction and familiarity and a life worth living. Eleven months of the year, that worked well for Sherlock. But then came December.

This winter had brought unusually mild weather, and Sherlock was glad for it. Then, three days ago, a cold spell had hit; the kind that covered the roofs with white frost and made the general population wear mittens and woolly hats if you ventured outside. A pang in his shoulder was Sherlock's first warning sign.

Today had been especially harrowing. The excitement of being called out to consult for Lestrade had quickly given way to aggravation at the increasing difficulty of working with the new crime scene investigator. Sherlock didn't think anyone could have more contempt for him than Anderson (the pre-conspiracy Anderson, he had to concede), but this man was proving him wrong. On any normal day, Sherlock would have been above all that, but the growing physical discomfort ground down his patience and frayed his nerves more than he would want to admit.

Adding to that, he could really have used John's medical expertise on this one. However, his friend was aptly missing, not unlike most cases Sherlock worked these days. When John wasn't putting in hours at the clinic, he was with his family. The last time Sherlock had seen him, he'd had dark circles under his eyes the diameter of teacups, which he explained to Sherlock in a volley of complaints about some digestive condition or other his infant was suffering from.

Sherlock had tuned out most of the details, but he'd heard enough to understand that dragging John out on cases wouldn't offer any kind of reprieve for the man.

John's personal visits had become less frequent with time. He texted occasionally, left voice mails, and every now and then came over for a cup of tea. Most times, Sherlock had to try hard not to utter disdain at the saliva stains next to his collar or the remnants of puree in his hair.

Not tonight, however. Sherlock noticed John was clean-shaven, with a freshly ironed shirt under a clean cardigan. Try as he might, he couldn't quite deduce why. It brought on more frustration that mounted on the existing pile, and it didn't help that Sherlock actually winced with a barely contained hiss as he picked up his teacup that sat on the stool next to his armchair.

John looked at him, scrutinized him carefully with a medically trained eye. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, John."

He could see that John was far from mollified. "You're not the only one who can study people. You're clearly favouring your left arm. Were you injured on a case?"

"I'm fine," Sherlock repeated, his tone more impatient.

"You should get that checked out. You really shouldn't trifle with a shoulder injury."

Sherlock wanted to sneer, because, yes, didn't he know it? "It's nothing. It'll go away. It always does."

"*Always*?" John repeated. "So this is an old injury?"

Sherlock wished he hadn't said anything. This damn day, his defence mechanisms were out of whack. Now there were going to be questions and more questions, and fussing and poking and prodding. He tried to decide what the best course of action would be.

Evasion didn't usually work with John, neither did feigning ignorance. Anger would only bring on more questions with an added potential for hostility. Complete honesty was out of the question. Careful half-truths might just do the trick.

"A war wound of sorts. It's nothing of concern. Now, can we please just sip our tea in silence, I need to think."

John seemed to let it go, which Sherlock was infinitely thankful for. A welcome quiet enveloped the flat, broken only by clanks of porcelain and rustling of the newspaper John had grabbed off the table.

Lestrade's case was definitely baffling, and he hadn't been allowed access to all the places he'd wanted to examine. A vital piece of information was missing, he knew it. He had to go back to the crime scene. He shot up from the leather armchair, trying to ignore the shooting pain in his shoulder that the sudden movement caused.

"I'm going out," he simply announced.

John gave him an unimpressed glance over the top of the newspaper.

Sherlock grabbed his coat and turned around to face John. "Are you coming?"

He could see John drawing in a long breath that he let out with an exasperated edge. "I assume this is for a case?"

"Yes, the murdered widower in the garden shed. I told you all about it."

"No, Sherlock, you haven't."

He frowned. "Yes, I have."

"When? In those fifteen minutes you were intently staring at your computer screen while I was borrowing shortbread from Mrs Hudson and cleaning dishes so we could have a decent cup of tea?"

Sherlock let out a hum, followed by, "Possible."

John sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll come along."

Sherlock frowned. Had successful procreation really transformed John H. Watson into this domesticated version of himself? Where was the thrill-seeking, the sense of adventure, the excitement of the prospect of mental stimulus?

Sherlock suddenly felt deflated, all enthusiasm drained instantly. The pinch in his shoulder made a fierce comeback, perfectly in tune with the verbal warning from Mrs Hudson that replayed in his head. *"It changes people, marriage."*

He hadn't wanted to believe it, but the nagging feeling at the back of his mind didn't want to relent.

"You know what?" he said to John, "Probably better if I go alone. Already caused a bit of a racket last time. Not worth getting you into trouble over this, really."

There was a time when John would have said, “Nonsense,” and grabbed his jacket without another word. This version of John just scrubbed a weary hand over his face and said, “Okay. Louisa’s really been a bit of a troublemaker lately. Mary needs all the help she can get.”

‘Thank you,’ Sherlock thought pointedly. Another reminder that John having tea with him was really just another pity party for the poor, lonely consulting detective. He didn’t bother to say any goodbyes and just blundered down the stairs without another word.

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The pain came in stages—on and off. Sometimes it underlined the nightmares like a ragged stroke emphasizing the climax of the hardships he’d endured. Sometimes it snuck up on him during moments of inopportune solitude in a flat that lacked the vibrancy of John’s bachelor days.

He’d tried to find relief through nicotine patches, actual cigarettes, ibuprofen, even codeine. The urge for something stronger was always there, barely out of reach, and it was sheer willpower that kept him from succumbing—and the sharply accusing look of Molly’s that had accompanied the sting of her palm on his face.

Christmas carols and artificial good cheer blazing from speakers and shop windows all throughout the city became almost unbearable. He knew he’d majorly pissed off Lestrade over the shed murder. Sherlock had provided the Yard with vital leads, aggravating every single officer in the process, but in the end it had been Donovan whose intuition had led to the arrest of the culprit. It annoyed Sherlock to no end.

Mrs Hudson bore the brunt of his moody escapades on most days, if only for the fact that she was there, and easily accessible. She’d stopped bringing him tea two days ago, which didn’t help. Lestrade had not contacted him in over a week, hadn’t responded to any of his texts. There were no messages, no new clients. The season was upon the general population, and even Molly had rebuffed him for a date she wouldn’t stop talking about.

The few times he’d tried to distract himself with the violin, it seemed to squeak with every bow, every note an insult to his senses. Days became insufferable, nights even more so. Sherlock couldn’t remember not feeling pain in his right shoulder.

It was a week before Christmas, he wasn’t even sure which day, when he heard a key turn in the lock downstairs, familiar soft footsteps trudging up the stairs. He hadn’t bothered closing the door to the flat despite the cold draught of air wafting over from the stairwell to the sofa.

He looked at his watch. Not even 3 PM. He was fairly sure it was a weekday. John didn’t visit during the day on weekdays, and he knew he wasn’t taking time off until after Christmas.

And yet, there he was, a grim frown etched into his forehead, his mouth a determined line. This didn’t bode well.

Sherlock wrapped his bathrobe more tightly around him, turning to lie on his side so that his back faced the room. The last thing he needed was John chastising him.

The more surprising it was that John merely took off his jacket and sat down in his armchair without uttering a single word. The many minutes of silence were disconcerting, and Sherlock’s shoulder throbbed more fiercely.

“Go away,” he finally snarled against the back of the sofa.

“If you’re talking to me,” John said innocently, “you’re not going to get rid of me so easily.”

“Don’t you have a sickly infant to coddle?” Sherlock snapped.

“Not today, I don’t.”

“Then why don’t you go annoy Mrs Hudson with your incessant breathing?”

“Because she’s not the one who needs me right now.”

Sherlock let out a frustrated growl. “I don’t need anyone. I need to be left alone.”

“Nope,” John just said in an annoyingly cheery tone. “All evidence points to the exact opposite.”

“Evidence? What evidence?”

“Oh, let me see. First the call from Greg, all but yelling at me how much of an obnoxious pain in the neck you are, and if I can’t find out what’s got you so on edge. Even after putting it through the Lestrade filter, that sent up a first warning flare. Then there’s the multitude of texts you never answered. Twelve to be exact. The final straw was what Mrs Hudson told me when I called her. Clearly, the worst thing to do right now is to leave you alone, since that’s not helping.”

Curiosity got the better of him, so Sherlock turned to lie on his back, still not looking at John. “So how is you sitting here going to help?”

“Perhaps there is an optimist hidden inside of me who chooses to believe that at some point you’re going to tell me what’s going on.”

“Perhaps you’re deluding yourself, so it would save both you and me a lot of trouble and time if you left sooner rather than later,” Sherlock countered.

John just shook his head in negation. “However long it takes, Sherlock.”

“Eternity not good enough for you?”

John chose to ignore the snide comment, kicked off his shoes, and leaned back to make himself more comfortable.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Sherlock watched him take out something from the bag he’d brought that looked suspiciously like an eBook reader. Undoubtedly a present from Mary, and not something he would have expected John to use, but from the way John handled the device, he was very familiar with it.

Two hours of silence passed easily, John tapping the screen of the black device at regular intervals. Sherlock didn’t have to guess what he was reading, John’s library consisted almost solely of medical textbooks and crime fiction. Predictable protagonists, possibly something World War II-themed.

Then John put the eReader down and went into the kitchen. The clanking of dishes and the running tap meant he was washing something. The unmistakable noise of the electric kettle could only mean tea. And sure enough, not five minutes later, John balanced a mug in each hand into the living room, setting one down on the couch table for Sherlock.

The fact that no words were exchanged suited Sherlock just fine. He knew he had to move eventually to reach for the mug, but not before John had settled back in his armchair. Watchful eyes were on him, he knew, and he thought he’d managed to hide another pained flinch while he was sitting up.

“Shoulder still bothering you, then?”

Not so well hidden, obviously, Sherlock chided himself.

“The shoulder’s just fine,” he said gruffly.

John pursed his lips for a moment, then gave a quick nod. He took a sip from the mug with an audible slurp, then continued reading.

Sherlock drew a peeved grimace. This was ridiculous. “Why don’t we stop this silly charade right here?”

John met his gaze, his tone neutral. “It’s entirely up to you, Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighed impatiently. “What is it you want from me?”

“That’s actually a very simple thing to answer. How about the truth?”

“I haven’t told you any lies.”

“A lie by omission is still a lie.”

“And I haven’t told you more than you needed to know because there’s going to be fussing and fretting and completely unnecessary questions. None of which I can or want to deal with right now.”

“So whatever is going on would warrant fussing and fretting, hm? You realize that this is not exactly giving me a whole lot of reassurance, don’t you?”

“What—” Sherlock said huffily. “What can I say that will get you off my case?”

“Again,” John replied calmly, “The truth will do just fine.”

Sherlock remained silent, weighing his options. He knew now that John would settle for nothing less than an actual version of the truth. He just didn’t know which one to tell. Stick to the facts. Always a good choice.

“I fell down a hole once. Dislocated my shoulder.”

“When?”

“About two years ago.”

John was quick to follow. “When you were dismantling Moriarty’s network.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Romania.”

“Did you get it checked out by a doctor?”

Sherlock shook his head. “The opportunity didn’t arise.”

“Someone must have fixed you up. A shoulder joint doesn’t just pop back into place on its own.”

“I did it myself. Watched it once. I was quite confident I knew how to do it. A little tricky if you don’t have someone to provide counter-traction.”

“That must have hurt.”

Sherlock didn’t want to be reminded. “A necessary evil, given my circumstances.”

“Which were?”

“Not ideal.”

John let out a sarcastic breath. “Care to elaborate?”

“No.”

“Sherlock…”

He remained silent, knowing he didn’t want to go there. Except he was *already* there. He’d been so sure he’d hidden it away in his Mind Palace and thrown away the key to that particular room. Obviously the lock hadn’t been failsafe.

Flashes of images pushed themselves into his subconscious, clamouring their way up to break free. They were all dark and gloomy and left a sour aftertaste of pain and loneliness and despair. He let out a frustrated grunt, willing them away.

“Why now?” John interrupted his thoughts.

“Sorry?”

“Why now?” he repeated. “Your shoulder pain—it’s happened before, you said. There must be some sort of trigger.”

“I don’t need you to be my psychiatrist, thank you, John.”

“Actually, I think you do. I know you won’t see a real one, so I’m the next best thing.”

“I would prefer not to talk about it.”

“Yes, that much is obvious. Doesn’t mean I’m going to just accept that.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, resignation nearing its high point. Yet, he remained silent, avoiding John’s scrutinizing gaze. Most times he admired the man’s relentlessness. Today he abhorred it.

“Okay,” John drew in a breath. “How about this? I’m going to tell you what I think happened, and you’re going to correct me if I’m wrong.”

“Bad idea.”

“Humour me. Please.”

He didn’t feel like humouring John. He’d already indulged the man too often. Damn his insistence, damn his presence, damn his ministrations.

He snarled, “You couldn’t possibly know what happened.”

“Well, I know that you spent two years going after Moriarty’s henchmen. I know you travelled all over the world to do so, and it must have taken you to some pretty dreary places. I’m guessing you did most of it on your own, and I’m sure that wasn’t just physically challenging.”

“Didn’t matter. It was necessary.”

“You know, Sherlock, it *does* matter.”

He scrunched up his face in incomprehension. “*Why*?”

“Because…” John stopped there, and Sherlock could see that he was struggling. “I don’t know how to explain this to you, because you never… Things just seem to roll off your back. But I know they really don’t. They manifest somewhere. In a drug habit or persisting insomnia or… or a recurrent pain in your shoulder. And it’s…”

He looked at Sherlock with a gaze that seemed to pierce a clean hole right through all his carefully crafted defences. “You’re not a machine. You’re a human being. And you need to allow yourself to be human sometimes.”

The words, these beautiful, honest words, left him raw and exposed. Something in his chest constricted. He squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the prickle of unbidden tears behind his eyelids.

This wasn’t him. Sherlock Holmes didn’t lose control over his emotions. Sherlock Holmes didn’t give in to sentiment.

There was a rustle that was getting closer, and when he opened his eyes, John was sitting on the edge of the coffee table, at a safe distance but still close. Sherlock pinched the bridge of his nose, clinging to the last remnants of control.

John’s voice was soft. “Sherlock, what happened in Romania?”

“I was careless. The damn infection, I was weak. It was stupid. I fell down a hole because I didn’t pay attention. It hurt like hell.”

“And you were all by yourself.”

“Of course I was. No one could know where I was.”

“You were talking about an infection. What infection?”

“I got stabbed by a bunch of low-lives in Russia. They got me in the leg—it was pretty deep. I stitched it up. Not pretty, but it did the trick. Still got infected. Not too surprising, considering I was living in a dump. Painkillers and the last antibiotics kept me afloat.” He snorted a sarcastic breath through his nose as he remembered. “I actually shot myself. In the knees.”

John’s brow furrowed in confusion, and Sherlock elaborated. “No, not like that. It was just in my head, and… Never mind. Not important now.”

“So you reduced your own shoulder. Has it ever been checked out?”

“Mycroft made sure my physical needs were well tended to upon my return to London.”

“No long-term damage? How’s your range of movement?”

“For God’s sake, John!” Scrutiny—irrelevant, irritating. “My shoulder is fine!”

John bristled and let it go, moving on to something Sherlock didn’t expect. “Tell me about Serbia.”

Damn his brother. How else could John know? “Why? You obviously already know what happened in Serbia.”

“Not as much as I’d like to. You got caught. Mycroft got you out.”

“No, he didn’t. *I* got me out.”

“What did they do to you?” There was no pity in John’s tone. A curiosity that was almost clinical.

“You know those Eastern European types. They wanted information. Put me through the ringer a bit.”

John shook his head, his expression stern, his eyes filled with a darkened resolve. “In other words, they tortured you. How bad?”

Sherlock shrugged. “They threw a few punches, then tried sleep deprivation—with little success. Guess they didn’t expect that, so they resorted to brute force. For some reason they avoided my face. The cuts on my back were a different matter. Cracked a rib or two. I vaguely remember a metal pipe. It’s a bit of a blur.”

John sucked in a sharp breath. “Jesus,” he whispered. It kept hanging in the air between them as the moments passed.

The silence prompted Sherlock to look at his friend’s face, and his eyes narrowed slightly. Was there a glint of tears in John’s eyes? Why was… This was confusing. John blinked quickly, wiping at one eye with his hand.

“You’re crying,” Sherlock simply stated.

“Yes, Sherlock,” John’s voice was thick with emotion. Yet, the sarcasm was always at the tip of his tongue. “Imagine that.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because I had no idea. Because you risked your life to keep all of us safe. That’s…” he stopped, drawing in a heavy breath, “That’s pretty huge.”

“Those two years—you understand now why I couldn’t tell you, don’t you?”

“Understand? Yeah, I’m still struggling with that. How…? *How* do you justify letting your best friend believe you’re dead for two years? Two years, Sherlock. That was pretty huge too, but not in a good way.”

“If you’d known, you would have put a stop to it. I couldn’t let that happen.”

John remained silent, digesting the information, letting it sink in. “So why now?” he finally asked.

“Why now what?”

“I’m guessing it’s the time of year, isn’t it? You returned to London right around this time. This, for you… this is Serbia all over again, just less harrowing.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, coming as close to making an admission as he ever would. “Maybe.”

John’s eyes were on Sherlock, he could feel it even though he wasn’t looking. John’s voice was gentle, and Sherlock had to concentrate to actually listen and not get lost in the images that beckoned behind closed eyelids.

“I know this is not what you want to hear, but this won’t just go away on its own.” John paused for a moment, then went on, “And you have to *want* it to go away.”

“What makes you think I don’t?”

John shook his head almost imperceptibly. “It’s not that. It takes effort. You can’t just lock it away in your Mind Palace and be done with it.”

Sherlock clenched his teeth, fully aware of where this was going. “If you’re going to suggest I see a couch doctor…”

“It would help.”

“No,” Sherlock simply stated.

“All right.”

Sherlock studied John warily, analysing all the pointers. The worry lines on John's forehead—a little less pronounced. The jaw—not clenched. The hands—folded but relaxed. The mouth—not quite a smile, not quite a troubled line. These were all good signs, he deduced.

"So we're done, then? That's it?" Sherlock asked in as much an innocent tone as he could muster.

John gave him one of those faux patient smiles that radiated irritation and scepticism. There, the clench in his jaw was back, yet he had enough self-control not to say what Sherlock was sure he was thinking. "You tell me."

"Please, John, I've had enough baring my soul for one night."

"Yeah. Okay." It sounded appeased enough. John finally got up from the table and settled back into the checkered armchair.

"So you're gonna stay?"

John gave him a cursory look. "Would you like me to go?"

"Mmh, no."

The silence that settled was filled with relief and understanding. There was still mourning to be done for things lost, a need for tipped over stepping stones to be straightened. They both knew it would take time, and they both knew the subject was likely to be revisited at some point in the future.

Few words were exchanged for the rest of the night, save for several text messages that John sent from his mobile phone.





Sherlock's phone dinged, and he noticed that his shoulder hurt a lot less when he shifted his weight to reach for the mobile on the couch table. He read the reply from his brother to the text he had sent him a few minutes ago. The smallest hint of a smile formed on his face.



Sherlock's gaze wandered over to John who was firmly planted in his armchair, his attention fully focused on his crime novel. Sherlock suddenly felt more at home than he had since the Fall.

He thought to himself, 'What do *you* know, Mycroft Holmes.'

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THE END.