Title: Antiseptic and Dryer Sheets
Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)
Summary: Shaun is irritable and just… off, and Lea can't figure out why.
Timeframe: This takes place at an indeterminate time during season 4 before episode 4x11.
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Nothing said 'disorientation' quite like waking up in the wee hours of the night. Dim light shone through the windows, and Lea couldn't help but notice that Shaun's side of the bed was uncannily empty.

She clumsily groped for her phone on the nightstand. 4:33. Great.

She rolled onto her back. Should she try to go back to sleep? Whatever he was doing, Shaun was a grown man, capable of fending for himself at 4:30 am without her emotional support. He'd probably had a eureka thought and was digging through textbooks or medical journals to figure out some medical problem that was plaguing him.

The rhythmic *tap tap tap* of socked feet on the wooden floor next door was barely audible, but now that she'd heard it, it was unmistakable. He was pacing.

Screw sleep. She got out of bed and pulled a fleece jacket from the chair in the corner. One of Shaun's St. Bonaventure Hospital zip-ups that was only barely too large for her. She carefully opened the door to the living room, expecting the lights to be on, but she was only met with the same murky light from the full moon outside.

He was pacing back and forth in front of the television. She called his name.

"Shaun?"

He briefly stopped, his eyes only meeting hers for a split second before they darted away again. "I woke you."

"Maybe, I'm not sure. What's going on?"

He just hummed noncommittally. Classic Shaun evasion tactic. Lea edged a little closer. "Shaun? Why are you pacing? Did something happen?"

"Hm. No."

"You seem upset."

Another hum.

"Shaun, what is going on?"

He stiffened and stopped pacing. "Leave me alone, please."

She frowned. "O…kay. I can do that, but I'm not sure that's a great idea. You clearly—"

“Leave me alone,” he interrupted in a louder voice that was now teetering on the edge of agitated. His movements were jerky, his breaths coming in quick succession, his hair messy, like he’d tousled it one too many times.

This wasn’t good. This was clouds brewing and darkening, slowly coalescing into a tornado, ready to hit.

She backed off. “Okay, I’ll leave you alone if you’re sure that’s what you want. But you know you can come to me with anything, right? You can wake me if you need anything or wanna talk.”

He turned his back and continued pacing.

“Shaun? Did you hear what I said?”

“I heard you,” he said monotonously, not looking at her.

“Okay.”

Sleep didn’t come easy, and Lea lay in bed for a long time, listening to his tapping feet in the next room, running scenarios through her mind of what had set him off.

She tried ignoring the lump in her stomach, but it was incredibly hard not to go back and just push until he would talk. Bouts of breakdowns or even full-blown meltdowns had been few and far between since they’d been living together; it had been a while since she’d seen him this bad.

Deep down, she knew pushing him now would be counterproductive. A yelling match and Shaun freaking out at 4:30 in the morning was not what any of them needed. It took her a long time to fall asleep again.

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Her phone alarm woke her again at 6:30, her eyelids like sandpaper on her corneas. A quick look confirmed Shaun was still absent. She doubted he’d ever come back to bed.

With a sigh, she got out of bed, trying to find the resolve to face whatever there was to face. She knew he was still here, because she could hear dish noises through the door.

And sure enough, he was by the counter, washing up a cereal bowl and spoon, already fully dressed.

“Good morning, Shaun,” he greeted him tentatively.

“Good morning, Lea,” he said, not turning around.

She squinted her eyes, walking closer, trying to gauge his state of mind. “Are you o—”

He abruptly turned, walked over to the coat rack and grabbed his jacket and backpack. “I am going to the hospital.”

“Your shift doesn’t start until 8. We can go together if you give me half an hour.”

He opened the door. “I am taking the bus.”

The door clicked into its lock behind him before she could say anything else.

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Lea had been playing hide-and-seek with Shaun all morning. Whenever she went looking for him, he wasn't anywhere to be found, or busy with a patient, one time he even turned around and hurried away in the other direction when he saw her.

What the hell was going on? Shaun was flaky at the best of times, and he could be brusque and evasive, but there'd always be that rubber band dynamic between the two of them. He'd pull away, she'd try to draw him closer with gentle pressure or mild encouragement, and eventually he'd bounce back.

There was no bouncing back today. It was as if he was using the rubber bad to catapult himself as far away from her as he could.

Lea decided it was time for a consult, because clearly this wasn't cutting it. She knocked on Glassy's door.

"Come in," she heard.

His head buried in paperwork, he looked up—and was it a smallest hint of a smile when he recognized her? No, she must just be imagining that.

"Lea," he greeted her.

"Dr. Glassman," she said.

His mouth drew into an actual smile that had a mischievous touch to it. "No need to be that formal. You've called me Glassy before. Aaron is also an option."

Ugh. No. "No disrespect, but that… sounds weird here in the hospital. After all, you're still my boss."

He shrugged. "Fair enough. What can I do for you?"

She closed the door behind her. "Have you spoken with Shaun today?"

He raised one eyebrow. "No, I haven't even seen him at all today. Is something wrong?"

"I… don't know. He was… I think he's upset about something, but he didn't wanna talk to me about it. He practically fled from the apartment this morning, and it's like he's actively avoiding me whenever I try to find him."

Glassman seemed intrigued, but she could also see the hint of worry flitting across his face. "Did you two have a fight?"

"No. Not really. I mean… No, it wasn't a fight. He was up in the middle of the night, pacing up and down the room, and when I asked what was wrong, he told me to leave him alone. And I did, but was that really the right thing to do? Maybe I should have pushed harder, maybe—"

"Lea," he interrupted her. "Shaun doesn't like to be pushed. You and I both know that. And from what I've seen, you're really great with respecting that."

She felt a slight pang of relief. "Yeah," she sighed. "But I hate seeing him like that."

“I know. But sometimes that’s all we can do. Give him space. Wait for him to come to us.”

“But what if he doesn’t? I don’t know, somehow this seems bigger than one of his normal funks.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little?”

Was she? “Yeah. Maybe you’re right. Patience has never been my strong suit.”

He met her eyes, and there was no hostility in them, only fatherly support. “You’re plenty patient with Shaun. You’ll figure it out.”

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Lea’s phone beeped. She looked at the time on her computer screen. 3:15 pm.

It was a message from Glassman. *‘Meet me at the coffee bar at 3:30?’*

Her forehead pulled into a frown. She responded, *‘Sure, I’ll be there in 15.’*

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Glassman was already waiting for his iced coffee to be made when she arrived. She opted for a regular cappuccino and sat down at one of the small, round tables in the corner that he motioned for her to join him at.

“So,” he started, his face inscrutable.

“So?” she probed when he didn’t elaborate.

“So I think I know what’s up with Shaun.”

“Did you speak to him?”

He shook his head. “I reached out, but he didn’t want to meet me for lunch. I think you’re right that he’s trying to hide.”

“And?”

He let out a long sigh. “It’s October 5th. That’s the day his brother died.”

Ah, geez. Should she have known that? He never really talked about Steve beyond what he had told her way back when, in the car, during their errant road trip. She always thought he had closed that chapter in his life, but it was hard to tell what really went on in Shaun’s mind most of the time.

“Does he… Does he usually get like this on this day?”

Glassman shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think he’s upset that I didn’t know? That I didn’t come and talk to him about it?”

“What? No. I don’t think his mind works like that. He’s probably confused, doesn’t know what to do with his emotions. He gets overwhelmed, and then he tends to run away. Why am I telling you this, you know that.”

“So what do I do?”

“Honestly? I wish I could tell you.”

“You were there for him during that time, weren’t you?”

Glassman looked down, studying the straw in his ice coffee a little too intently. “Not as much as I wanted. As much as I should have, probably. He stayed with me that first night after Steve passed away, but I couldn’t take on the responsibility of caring for a special-needs teenager at the time.

“He was handed off into foster care, went through a number of different placements. You know how it is. Kids with special needs often don’t get the attention they need in the system.

“I, uh… I had my own personal issues to work out, and when his last foster situation fell apart, he lived with me for a while before he turned 18. All things considered, I think he came out the other end okay. He’s a smart kid, and he had people looking out for him back in Casper.

“Still, he took Steve’s death really hard, which was to be expected. He, uh…” Glassman rubbed his brow with three fingers. “You should really be hearing this from him.”

“How, if he’s shutting me out like this?”

He gave her a small, encouraging smile. “You’ll figure it out. You’re pretty great with him. Better than anyone I’ve seen.”

She bit her lip, fumbling with the furrows of the cardboard coffee cup. “At least now I know where to start. Thanks,” she met his eyes, “Glassy.”

His smile widened. “Any time. And you can call me if you need me.”

She nodded and took the last sip of her cappuccino, trying to figure out a game plan.

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The day dragged on, and Lea tried to distract herself with work as best as she could. She texted Shaun to tell him she’d be going home around 6, and if he wanted to go with her. He didn’t respond.

Back in their apartment, she fixed herself a sandwich, unsure of whether she should wait with dinner for Shaun to come home. Who knew if he even would come home today. How was she going to approach this?

What had his relationship with Steve been like, she wondered. Clearly, Steve had looked out for his brother. She tried to remember what they both looked like at that age, wanted to look at the photo they kept framed on the shelf, although she knew she wouldn’t be able to gauge their relationship and their bond from one single picture.

This was curious. The picture frame was lying face-down, as if he’d placed it like that on purpose.

She carried the picture frame over to the dining table and sat it down. Her elbows on the tabletop, fist in front of her mouth, she looked at the photo intently. Two young boys looking at the camera, Shaun much taller than his younger brother, both full of youth and hope and sense of adventure. Who had taken that picture?

She opened her laptop and started poking around for old newspaper articles that might have covered the accident, but she only found one archived blip on the website of a local paper that didn't give her any information she didn't already know.

Lea was still clicking her way through search engine results when she heard the noise of keys turning in the lock. Swallowing down a lump in her throat, she closed the lid of the laptop and watched him enter, hanging the jacket on the coat rack, putting the backpack on the floor. Not surprisingly, he didn't look at her.

Wordlessly, he made a beeline straight for the sofa, sat down, and switched on the weather channel.

She waited a long minute. "Shaun," she said. "I'm right here."

"Yes, I know."

She closed her eyes and sighed. *Glassy, from your lips to God's ears,* she thought. She took the picture frame and walked over to the sofa, sitting down on the coffee table opposite him. She held up the picture with him and Steve.

"Shaun, I know what day it is today."

He briefly glanced at the photo, then stoically returned his gaze to the TV screen. "You are blocking the view."

She put the frame down on the coffee table next to her. "Don't you think we should talk about this?"

"Hm," he hummed. "No."

"I can see that you're upset, you've been hiding from me and Glassy all day. Talking about it can help, you know. There's this saying, 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. Don't you think you should try?"

"No," he reiterated. "I don't wanna talk about it."

Don't push, she reminded herself. *Let him come to you. Give him space.*

She reached out to pick up the picture frame to put it back on the shelf, but Shaun lashed out with a sharp, "No."

She quickly drew back her hand.

"Please don't touch it."

"Okay. We'll just leave it here."

"N-no."

"Then what—"

He rapidly stood up and took the frame, but his grasp clumsy and imprecise, Lea could only watch helplessly as it slipped from his hand and tumbled to the floor, the glass breaking upon impact, shattering into shards of different shapes and sizes.

Both of them stared at it, and she heard his distressed, “No. No, no, no.”

“Shaun.”

He pressed his palms together in front of him and slowly rubbed them up and down. “You took it from where it belongs, and now it’s broken. It is your fault.” Tears swam in his eyes, and Lea stood helplessly, her arms by her side.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to mess with it, I just wanted to—”

His voice was loud and anxious. “I don’t need your help. I don’t want to talk. You keep asking me, and I don’t want to.”

He was now clasping his hands in front of him, wringing them, his knuckles white, rocking slightly back and forth on his heels. She took a step back, because she knew very astutely that if she pushed any further, he would disintegrate right here. She’d seen it happen a few times, and it was always ugly and heartbreaking.

“It’s okay, Shaun. You don’t have to talk.”

He bent down and started picking up the glass shards. She felt more helpless than ever. “Let me get the vacuum cleaner.”

“No, I don’t want—ow.”

When Lea looked, he was holding up his hand, crimson blood seeping down his right index finger.

She hurried over to the sink, picking up the dish cloth that hung neatly where it belonged—like everything in this apartment. Shaun was staring intently at his bleeding finger. Was his mind somewhere far away, or if he was trying to assess the damage?

“Here,” she held the dish cloth out to him. “Shaun?”

He took it from her only hesitantly, but didn’t do anything with it.

“Shaun, you’re dripping blood all over the floor.”

“It is not hygienic. I could get an infection.”

She sighed. What the hell was she supposed to do? Patience and space was all good and well, but now he was injured and bleeding.

She went over to stand opposite him, too close for his comfort, she knew, but something had to give. She took the dish cloth from his hand and wrapped it around his bleeding finger and hand. “Hold this.”

He hesitantly complied.

“Sit down at the table.” As an afterthought, she added, “Please.”

“No,” he said, and walked to the kitchen sink, holding his finger under running tap water.

Okay. Good. That was progress.

She tried to remember where they kept their first aid kit and the disinfectant. The cabinet in the bathroom? Yes, there it was. She hoped everything they needed was there.

Back in the living room, she put the red nylon bag on the counter next to him and unzipped it. He was studying the cut, lightly prodding the injured finger with his left hand.

“Okay,” she said, “Tell me what to do. Does it need stitches?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s not very deep. It should be disinfected.”

“I don’t wanna do it wrong, please tell me how.”

It was uncanny how, at a moment’s notice, he transformed from taciturn recluse to verbose teacher, rattling off exact instructions while she fixed up his finger. In the end, it had all looked a lot more dramatic than it actually was, with a one-inch band-aid now wrapped securely around his fingertip.

“There,” she said, “Amputation averted.”

“This cut was superficial. It would not necessitate an amputation unless—”

“Shaun,” she interrupted. “It was a joke.”

He gave one nod. “I understand. You referred to an exaggerated serious outcome to stress that it was not a severe injury.”

“Exactly.” She turned and pointed in the direction of the couch. “Is it okay if I clean up the broken glass? I’ll just put the photo on the coffee table, you can decide what you wanna do with it later. We can buy a new frame for it. I may even still have one somewhere.”

His eyes darted around the room for a second, then he gave her a simple, “Okay.”

The photo and the frame itself were still intact, it was only the glass that had splintered and fallen out. She was careful not to cut herself as she picked up the glass splinters and threw them into the trash. For good measure, she generously vacuumed the space around the couch. Having glass shards embedded in your feet wouldn’t be fun, and Shaun wasn’t very fond of wearing slippers. Come to think of it, she wasn’t even sure he owned any.

He was still waiting near the kitchen counter, fiddling idly with the hem of the band aid on his finger, when she came out of the storage room next to the kitchen after putting the vacuum cleaner away

“Lea?”

She studied him carefully. “Yes?”

“You want me to talk about Steve, but even though I don’t want to, we can talk about him.”

“No, Shaun. You don’t need to talk about him if it’s too hard or too painful.”

“It is confusing. Steve has been dead for a long time. I don’t understand why it makes me feel this way.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing about emotions. They don’t always make sense. Sometimes ignoring them makes them go away, but other times it makes them more intense, especially if you keep it all bottled up inside.”

He shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

“No one likes grief, or being distraught or sad. But ultimately it’s what makes us human. And it’s what helps us grow.” She shook her head. “Listen to me, I sound like a teacher.”

He smiled a small smile. “You *are* a teacher.”

“I hated most of my teachers.”

“So did I. A lot of them were arrogant, and they didn’t have any patience with me. Except Mr. Nelson. He was very patient.”

“Here, let’s sit down,” she pointed to the chairs at the kitchen island. “I’d love to hear about Mr. Nelson.”

He followed and pulled out a chair to sit. “He was my science teacher in 9th and 10th grade.”

She let out a chuckle. “Well, that figures.”

“Why?”

“Because science is totally your thing. Mr. Nelson probably saw that, too. And now you’re a brilliant surgeon.” As an afterthought, she added, “And a teacher.”

“I don’t like being a teacher. It is *very* difficult.”

“You could watch some more TED Talks…”

“They don’t help. They gave me advice that didn’t work.”

“Oh?”

“They said to be an inspiring leader, you need to push excellence in your team. I tried that, and it didn’t work. They also said to appeal to people’s emotions. I don’t know how to do that.”

“Yeah, okay, I can see how that wouldn’t really work for you. Have you tried to look for anything that’s focused specifically on people with ASD? There must be others who face the same struggles you do.”

He made a face. “I… hm. No.”

“Why not?”

“Hm.”

“You know, admitting you have ASD isn’t a sign of weakness. If anything, I think it’s actually the opposite.”

“You didn’t want to be my girlfriend because I have ASD.”

“I… didn’t. But then I changed my mind. *You* changed my mind. And I was an idiot.”

“You are not an idiot.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, but I kinda was. Beats me why I ever thought it would be the right thing to pass up the opportunity to be with you.”

His eyes briefly met hers, then his gaze flickered away, darting across the space where the wall cabinets met the ceiling. “I miss Steve,” he blurted out.

“Shaun,” she said, her voice as sympathetic as she could make it. “You don’t have to do this.”

“You said it could help. I don’t like missing Steve.”

“What do you miss the most about him?”

“Hm. A lot of things. The way he always knew what to do when I was confused. The way he made mac & cheese taste better than my mother’s, even though we didn’t have a proper stove. The way he always gave me surprise presents. The way he punched Ricky Besconi in the face when he bullied me.”

“He punched a kid in the face for you?”

Shaun nodded. “He did.”

“He must have been a really good brother.”

“He was. The best.” She looked at him, saw the tears in Shaun’s eyes, saw the raw emotion flooding in and spilling over.

“It’s okay to miss him, you know? He was your whole world there for a while. And his death must turned it upside down. I couldn’t even imagine what that must have been like for you.”

“It was… not good.”

“That sounds like quite the understatement.”

“No, it’s not. It *was* not good. I didn’t want to go back to my parents, and Dr. Glassman couldn’t take care of me. So I was in a foster home for a while. I didn’t like it there, it smelled of urine and bergamot. Then I lived with a foster family for a few weeks, but they had four other children and it was very loud. I hit one of them when she touched me.

“I liked staying with Mrs. Meeks, but I had to move out after eight months because she was dying. Tough titmouse.”

Lea had to laugh out loud. “Tough titmouse?”

“That’s what she always said when you had to do something that you didn’t want.”

“That’s a good one. She sounds like she was pretty decent.”

Shaun shrugged one shoulder. “She was okay. Her house smelled of old wood.”

“You had a photo of you and Steve in the old studio apartment, the both of you in a bus.”

He nodded. “We lived there until Steve died. I slept on an old gymnastics mat in the aisle, and Steve slept on the seats. We had a camping cooker, but going to the toilet was not very convenient. Mrs. Binkley would sometimes let us use the shower at the outdoor swimming pool. It was very cold in the winter, and it didn’t smell very nice.”

“What did it smell like?”

“Stale. Like… mold.”

“Ugh, yeah, that sounds icky.”

Shaun visibly shuddered at the recollection. “I didn’t like the towels at the swimming pool, they were scratchy. When I told Steve about it, he said I had to suck it up because not everything in life was sunshine and roses. I’m not sure why he said that, roses are just flowers.”

He met her gaze and held it for a few, unusually long seconds. “Have I talked about Steve enough now?”

“Oh, Shaun. Were you just doing this to do me a favor?”

He seemed to ponder the question for a few seconds. “Hm. No. It was nice. But now I want to stop.”

“Then we’ll stop. I’m really glad you told me all this.”

“Why?”

“Because it… tells me more about the kind of person you are.”

“You already know what kind of person I am.”

“I do, but Steve was a big part of your life. He shaped you into the person you are today.”

“I’ve always been the same person.”

Oh boy. This was going to be one of the Shaun conundrums. “No one is ever the same person for their whole life. You didn’t come out of the womb the sweet, inquisitive, and incredibly kind human being that you are. A lot of that comes from how we grow up, who our role models are, and who teaches us behaviors and values.”

“My parents weren’t very good role models.”

“No, they weren’t, but Steve was. Glassy was, to an extent. Right?”

He nodded slowly. “I guess so.”

“And look at you today. Do you think you would be the same person if Steve hadn’t been there?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. I would have to have another sample to compare to, and there is only me.”

“Exactly. There is only you, and you are amazing. And I’m very, very sure that you would be less amazing if you hadn’t had Steve.”

A small smile played at his lips. “I think you’re right.”

“He’d be really proud of you.”

That seemed to puzzle him, judging by his expression. “Steve is dead. How can you know that?”

“I… don’t? And you’re right, we can’t really know that. But I bet he was really proud of you when he was still alive, and looking at everything you’ve accomplished, it’s only logical that he would be proud of you today, if he were alive.

“But here’s what I know for sure: *I* am incredibly proud of you, and so is Glassy.”

Shaun closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, malcontent in them. “I was cranky today. I wasn’t a very good person.”

“No, Shaun, that’s not true. I mean, yes, you were cranky, but you had a good reason. And that’s normal. Everyone is cranky sometimes. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I was cranky when I couldn’t see you because of COVID. I don’t like being cranky.”

“I think that’s kind of the point of being cranky.”

“I don’t wanna be cranky again.”

“I wish it were that easy, but you can come and talk to me when you’re cranky again, because maybe I can help you being less cranky on those days. Do you feel less cranky now?”

“Hm. I’m not sure.”

“And that’s okay, too. We can be cranky together.”

“Oh, no. I don’t want you to be cranky.”

She had to laugh again. “I’m not cranky. But I’m okay if you’re cranky, as long as you’re not being self-destructive.”

“Okay,” he affirmed.

“Do you think you want a hug?”

He pondered that for a moment, then got up from his chair and waited. Her mouth curved into a small smile. She went up to him and gingerly put her arms around him, waiting to see what he would do. She hoped he’d return the gesture, because if he didn’t, she knew he was allowing her to touch him just for her sake.

It seemed that way for a long moment, and then she felt his hands softly on her back.

She squeezed just a little more and lay her head against his chest. He smelled of antiseptic and dryer sheets.