

Regrets Collect Like Old Friends

a *The Good Doctor* story by TeeJay

Summary: Surfacing memories and a patient's personal story touch Shaun in unexpected ways. It's a good thing he can lean on the support of friends and family as he works through it. (Set between seasons 4 and 5.)
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Author's Note: This is a reworked version of my previous story 'Antiseptic & Dryer Sheets', which I wrote fairly early in my TGD journey. After discussing a bit with fellow fans and going over character motivations and backstories, I felt that I hadn't fully captured where Lea and Shaun stood at the time, so I took the story and gave it a huge overhaul. Both versions probably have merit to exist, but I feel that this one is truer to the canon characters.
Thanks go out to Daniela and Jorg_from_the_Jungle for the feedback and helpful comments!
Timeframe: This takes place between seasons 4 and 5, but let it be said that, at the time I wrote it, the season 5 premiere had not yet aired, and all we had was a promo teaser that was fraught with speculation as to what is happening with the wedding. Some of this may end up not aligning with actual canon, once season 5 airs.
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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. "I'm fine."

She frowned. "O…kay. Are you sure? You clearly—"

"I'm fine," 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 tried one more time. "Shaun, you can talk to me if something is bothering you. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know," he said snippily.

Lea let out a long breath through her nose. She was tired, and wasn't giving her anything. As much as it pained her, she hoped this was one of those times that he simply needed to work through something on his own. He usually came to her when he was ready, and she knew he valued her giving him space when he needed it.

She backed off. "Okay, I'll leave you alone if you're sure that's what you want. But you can definitely wake me if you need anything or wanna talk."

He turned his back and continued pacing.

“Shaun?” she said in a gentle voice. “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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Lea wasn’t sure what finally woke her, it hadn’t been her alarm. Her eyelids felt like sandpaper on her corneas, and a look at her phone confirmed she could have easily slept another 40 minutes until her alarm would go off. A quick look confirmed Shaun was still absent. She doubted he’d ever come back to bed.

More sleep was out of the question now. With a sigh, she tried finding the resolve to face whatever there was to face. She knew he was due at the hospital for the afternoon shift, and she wondered if he had maybe fallen asleep on the couch. She listened, but couldn’t hear anything.

Lea crawled out from under the blankets and put on her nightgown. When she opened the door, she could see he was in front of the television, watching the Weather Channel. She frowned, but this wasn’t exactly unexpected. A clear sign that he was trying to calm himself with something comforting, something he found soothing and familiar. She knew better than to interrupt him, and quietly went into the bathroom for her morning routine.

When she was done and ready, Shaun hadn’t moved. The sound of the TV was low, and as far as she could tell, there was something about a freak snowstorm in one of the northernmost states. She wondered what her best approach would be. Should she sit with him? Try to gently pry information out of him? Or just make breakfast?

She decided on the former and rounded the edge of the couch, when she noticed something odd. The photo of Shaun and Steve that was always standing on the shelf was lying face-down, the photo no longer visible. Had it fallen over? Had Shaun done this on purpose?

For a moment she pondered putting it back how it belonged, but then thought the better of it and sat down silently on the couch next to Shaun. His face seemed blank but tranquil. There was something to be said for The Weather Channel, after all.

“Hey,” she said in a low voice.

He didn’t look at her, but at least he acknowledged her with a soft, “Hm.”

“Still don’t wanna talk?”

He didn't answer, and Lea was starting to worry. He wasn't usually this unapproachable—not with her. "Shaun, I'm getting really worried. I wish you would tell me what's going on." She pointed to the photo on the shelf. "Did you do that?"

His gaze flickered over the shelf, then back to the TV. "Shaun, I wanna help you, whatever it is. You can talk to me."

He blinked blankly. "You can't help."

"Okay. But don't you—"

"Lea," he said, and there was an undertone there that clearly said, *'Not now.'*

She nodded. "Okay. I'll make us some breakfast."

They didn't usually indulge in pancakes on a workday, but this felt like the right thing to do and she had the extra time, so Lea got to work, making sure she made the dough from scratch with real eggs instead of the ready-made mix. She added an extra handful of chocolate chips for good measure.

Soon the frying pan was sizzling, and it surprised her that Shaun was now joining her in the kitchen.

"It's not Saturday. Why are you making pancakes?" he asked.

"Because we both woke up way too early, and I thought maybe pancakes could make up for that…"

He seemed confused by that answer, but didn't probe further. "Do you need help?"

"No, I'm good. Don't you wanna finish watching your weather reports?"

"No," he said. "I will set the table."

"All right. Do you want OJ, water or milk?"

"Milk, please."

Of course. Why was she even asking? By the time Shaun had set the table, she had the first chocolate chip pancakes sizzling in the frying pan, and the coffee maker was also doing its bidding, the smell of freshly brewed coffee mingling with butter and fried dough.

Pancakes were their comfortable Saturday morning thing. They didn't get the lazy, laid back breakfasts enough, with his on-call and shift schedule being crazy at times. She knew he always tried to make time for her when he could, and he loved his job, but sometimes she secretly wished he had more of a regular work schedule.

The pancakes easily slid from the spatula onto the plate she had set on the counter, and she put in the next batch before she carried the plate over to the table where Shaun was already sitting.

"Here you go, Shaunie. Choc chip, just the way you like them." She smiled at him as she set the plate down in front of him.

His face was still a mask of pensiveness and withdrawal, but she noticed the slightest of smiles hiding underneath when he saw the pancakes. Sometimes he was all about the simple pleasures, and it made her happy that she could do something for him, even if it was as simple as making him breakfast.

More out of convenience than actual appetite, she made another batch of pancakes for herself with the remaining dough. Shaun was already nibbling on a small piece of his, and it was kinda cute how he was waiting for her to join him, but not patient enough to deny himself a sneak peek of the sugary goodness that was waiting for him.

He was now intently studying the food on his plate. “You used more chocolate chips than usual.”

“I did,” she smiled at him.

“Is it to appease me or to get me to talk to you?”

She pursed her lips. “No, Shaun. It’s because I know you love chocolate chips, and I wanted to make them extra nice.”

“Why did you think they had to be extra nice today?”

She hesitantly shrugged. “Because… maybe I figured you could use a little extra TLC today…?”

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That it’s Steve’s birthday today.”

Ah, geez. That’s what it was, and it suddenly explained everything. “No,” she said quietly. “I didn’t know.”

“He would be 28 today.”

She swallowed. What could she say to that? She suddenly felt out of her depth. It was unusual to see Shaun dwelling on the past. She knew there was a lot of underlying trauma from his childhood years, some of which he probably still hadn’t fully processed, but his brain worked so differently from that of neurotypical people. It was hard to imagine what was going on in that head of his.

“Is that something you think about often?” she asked him. “What Steve would have turned into if, you know… things had happened differently?”

Shaun was chewing on a piece of pancake, his face inscrutable. “Hm. Not really.”

“What do you think he would be doing right now?”

Shaun kept putting pancake into his mouth. He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

She took a sip from her coffee. “If he were here, what do you think you would be doing for his birthday? Have a nice laid back night out? Or wild, unbridled bar hopping? Big birthday party at home with his wife and kids, maybe? Or husband and kids?”

She looked up, and immediately knew she had said the wrong thing. Shaun had stopped chewing, and the knuckles of his right hand around the knife were white. “I don’t know,” he blurted out.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean—”

“I don’t know what Steve would like doing today. He died.” Shaun’s voice was now clearly agitated. “He died, and he isn’t here, and he never will be.”

She put down her knife and fork, making sure it didn’t clank loudly on the plate. “I’m sorry, Shaun. I didn’t mean to upset you. We don’t have to talk about him if you don’t want to.”

He let out a shaky breath that was laced with a hint of relief. She knew he didn’t like to be pressured. Sometimes that was the recipe to actually get him to talk – not to pressure him.

The thumb of his left hand nervously rubbed the handle of his fork. “Why did you ask me those questions?”

“I… don’t know. I guess that’s what people do sometimes—try to imagine what kind of people your loved ones who passed away would be like if they were still alive. You know, would they have a family? What would their chosen career path be?”

“Why? What does that accomplish? They are dead, and we will never know any of that for sure.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess it’s… kinda comforting. Trying to imagine that they’d be good people, that they’d be living a happy life. It’s maybe a little like making the memories you never *could* have.”

“That’s not comforting. That’s just sad.”

He cut off another piece of pancake and ate it. Lea wasn’t sure what to respond to that. Anything to say now could be the wrong thing. She waited, but Shaun was just quietly eating his pancakes, drinking sips of his milk along with it.

She sat with him, eating her own pancakes in silence, unsure if that was the right thing to do. He was clearly more brittle today, sorting through emotions that didn’t make sense to him, that he didn’t know how to conceptualize or put into words.

When he was nearing the remnants of his last pancake, she asked him, “Do you want more pancakes? I can make some more.”

“No, thank you,” he said softly. “You should go to work.”

“I could work from home today if you want, at least until your shift starts.”

“Hm. No. You should go to the hospital,” he repeated.

“Shaun?” she said, waiting, hoping he would look at her. He did, for a brief half second. “Whatever you need today, please let me know, okay? You can call me, or text me any time, or come see me later, and I’ll listen.”

His voice was just above a whisper. “Okay.”

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Even though she was loath to admit it, Lea was worried the whole morning. She deliberated texting or calling Shaun so many times, but never went through with it. She hoped he wasn't going stir-crazy at home, or working himself up without anyone there to guide him out of a crisis.

Then again, he'd come such a long way over the last few years. Their relationship had done him a world of good, she knew that. And once he went to work later, it would provide a much needed distraction. Being a surgeon was part of his coping strategy sometimes. It was where he was fully in his element.

She didn't know Asher or Jordan well enough to really tell how in tune they were with Shaun's needs, but she was confident that Park would be supportive, no matter what. After all, he'd lived with Shaun for several months, and worked with him now for three years. Even in the absence of Claire, they seemed to be a good team.

There was one person, however, that Lea wanted to talk to—it was time for a consult. She knocked on Glassy's door.

"Come in," she heard.

His head buried in paperwork, he looked up—and was it the 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 at 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. "I, uh… Do you know what day it is today?"

He looked at the wall calendar with some pharma company's logo on it, his brow furrowing. "It is… Tuesday?"

"It very much is, but does the date not mean anything to you?"

He raised one eyebrow. "March 22nd? *Should* that date mean anything to me?"

"It probably should. It's Steve's birthday."

Glassman visibly slumped, sudden sadness and embarrassment tainting his features. "Ah, geez, how could I forget that?" he sighed. "I'm guessing there's a reason you're coming here to tell me this? Is Shaun okay?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. He was up in the middle of the night, pacing up and down the room, not communicating. We had breakfast and he talked a little, but it was… I don't know." She let out a long breath. "He seems kinda… on edge. I mean, it's understandable, right? But you know Shaun. He doesn't usually dwell on things, and I'm not sure if I should have pushed a little harder, or if I should call him, or go home or—"

“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.”

“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.”

He was probably right, but what if Shaun wasn’t going to? How was she going to approach this? She knew so little about that time, about what it had been like for Shaun.

She met Glassman’s eyes. “You knew Steve, right? You were there for them, you were there for Shaun after Steve died.”

Glassman looked down, studying the keyboard of his computer 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.”

She drew in a long breath. “I don’t know how much he told you about that night in Casper, but he was… He was in a really dark place. I don’t want him to go back there, and if this is going to rip open all those old wounds again…” She trailed off.

“What *did* happen that night? He just said you slept together. I mean, not *together*-together. I guess… just slept?”

She closed her eyes, trying to keep the emotions in check. “Yeah, it was… He was hurting himself, probably overwhelmed, imploding, not sure where to put all those negative emotions. He held on to me, and—” she could feel tears stinging in her eyes, “he just cried. You know, the kind of ugly crying that just overruns you and drags you down into that really dark hole. I just… I held him until he fell asleep.”

She quickly wiped at her eyes, and saw that Glassman was also blinking hard. His voice was soft and gentle. “Did the two of you ever talk about that?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. I mean, I wanted to, the next morning, but he insisted he was fine. You know how he is. Maybe it’s his ASD, but he tends to bounce back quickly from these kinds of crises, right?”

Glassman nodded. “Yeah.”

“Is this normal for him?”

“This what?”

“Him getting upset on Steve’s birthday.”

Glassman’s mouth twitched to one side. “I honestly don’t know.” He was quiet for a moment. “I don’t recall any past incidents.”

“So what changed? Did something trigger this?”

“Does it always have to? Not everything in life has rhyme or reason. Sometimes things just happen.”

“Yeah, but this is Shaun.”

“And that’s exactly my point. This is Shaun.”

Her mouth curved into a small smile. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. So what do I do with that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I may have known him for over a decade, but it’s not like he comes with a handbook. Try to be patient. Be there when he comes to you. What else *can* you do?”

“Patience has never been my strong suit.”

He met her eyes, and there was no dichotomy in them, only fatherly support and maybe the tiniest hint of a mischievous smile. “You’re plenty patient with Shaun. I think you’ll figure it out.”

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Asher studied the information on the tablet intently. A new case that had come in from a surgical ER consult, one of Dr. Murphy’s cases. A 42-year-old woman with pain in the pelvic region following a recent bone marrow donation. Scans had revealed a deep hematoma requiring surgical intervention, a rare complication of the marrow harvesting.

Murphy had handed the tablet to him with the words, “This will be a great case for you to learn,” and then he’d walked away without further explanation. Asher wasn’t sure what to do with that. To learn what? Patient handling? Diagnostic approaches? Surgical techniques?

Being on cases with Dr. Murphy sure was a challenge—and not one Asher had thought would be part of his residency learning experiences. The guy was smart—super smart, creative, caring, incredibly invested, and terrible at communication. He knew it was because of his autism, and Asher tried not to judge, but it was hard to know how to work with him sometimes.

He looked at the imaging scans again, then the lab results. Everything seemed as expected for the diagnosis. Asher was puzzled. He went looking for Dr. Murphy.

It was in the doctor’s lounge that he found him, seemingly engrossed in a medical journal. He walked up to him. “Dr. Murphy?”

Murphy looked up briefly, not quite meeting Asher’s gaze. “Yes?”

“I, uh… I looked over Mrs. Chapman’s file, and I’m not sure what I should be looking for. I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. Was there something specific you wanted me to check or… look into?”

Murphy’s answer was absent-minded but to the point. “Hm. No.”

“You said this would be a great case for me to learn.”

“Yes.”

“Is there more to this case than it being a routine hematoma evacuation?”

“No, I didn’t think so. Have you found any abnormalities in the patient file?”

“No, that’s why I’m a bit farmisht.”

“Far…misht?”

“Yeah, sorry, that’s Yiddish for confused.”

“What are you confused about?”

“What is it about this case that you feel is a good learning opportunity?”

“Dr. Andrews will be leading this surgery, and he will be using the tension hematoma evacuation methodology. The technique was established for traumatic subcutaneous hematomas many years ago but hasn’t been used for deep tissue hematomas at this hospital until recently. You should study the relevant literature before the surgery, you will likely be using this technique in the future. Has the patient been informed of the risks and benefits?”

“I… don’t know.”

“It is your job to know. Have you informed the patient about the risks and benefits?”

“No, not yet.”

Murphy earmarked the page he was on, closed the journal and put it down on the table. “Then I will come with you. This is another opportunity to learn.” He looked very self-satisfied with that assessment.

Asher raised his eyebrows and followed Murphy to the patient’s room. While they were walking, Asher confirmed the recommended course of treatment with Murphy, who readily agreed with Asher’s suggestions.

Arriving in Mrs. Chapman’s room, Murphy stood further back from the bed, indicating for Asher to step forward. Mrs. Chapman looked at him expectantly. Risks and benefits, right? That’s what he was supposed to do…?

He harrumphed. “Mrs. Chapman, I’m Dr. Wolke. Our tests indicate that you’ve developed a deep hematoma as a complication of the bone marrow donation procedure you underwent recently. This is what’s likely causing your pain and the weakness in your left leg. The best way to treat this is to drain the hematoma surgically.

“The procedure is normally performed under regional anesthesia, but in some cases we recommend general anesthesia. There are risks associated with both options.”

He continued listing out the risks associated with the different options, and looked at Murphy when he was done. Murphy added, “We don’t expect you to be immobilized very long after the procedure, but should this become necessary, it will increase your risk of developing deep vein thrombosis, pulmonary embolism, and other cardiovascular complications.”

Asher looked at Mrs. Chapman. “Do you have any questions?”

“How long will I have to stay in the hospital after the procedure?”

“That will depend somewhat on how well the draining goes, but usually it shouldn’t be more than a few days. We will definitely keep you updated on the progress and prognosis.” He pulled up the wheeled stool to sit down next to the bed. “I would like to examine your pelvis again, if you don’t mind. Can you lie on your side, please?”

“Go on, do your worst,” Mrs. Chapman quipped, and Asher gave her an amused smile. “It’s not like I haven’t been poked and prodded ad nauseum already.”

Murphy stepped closer as Asher exposed the relevant area and started gently probing it with his fingers. As he did so, Mrs. Chapman kept talking. “Just my luck to get the rare complications, huh? They told me this could happen, but when you hear ‘rare’, you don’t think it’s gonna happen to you, right?”

Asher was trying to figure out what to say to that, but it seemed Mrs. Chapman was one of the chatty ones who didn’t necessarily need the verbal validation. “I thought I knew what I was getting into, but this is a bit more than I signed up for.”

Trying to make conversation, Asher asked, “Did you donate for a specific reason?”

She let out a short breath through her nose. “Yes and no.” He couldn’t see her face as she had her back turned to him, but Asher thought her voice was suddenly thicker with emotion. “It was supposed to be for my son.”

“Supposed to be?”

“He was born with severe cerebral palsy. He couldn’t walk, had to be fed and cared for around the clock. My husband couldn’t take it, he left when he was three years old. I had no job, no income, and a child that needed more than I could give him.”

Asher finished his exam and rolled the stool back, acutely aware that he couldn’t just leave now. He waited.

“I didn’t want to, but I had to give him up because I knew I couldn’t give him what he needed.” She sniffed once, and even though Asher couldn’t see her face, it sounded very much like she was trying to keep her emotions in check. Murphy was standing ramrod straight next to him.

“He was in the system for a while, but I think I can consider myself lucky, because they found him a wonderful foster family who eventually adopted him. He’s 15 now, and I haven’t seen him since he was a toddler, but all those years, I endlessly fought whether to reach out or not. I never did. It was just too hard, you know? What if I wanted him back? Or worse, what if I didn’t?

“And then, a month ago, I get this call from his adoptive mother that he’s been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma and needs a bone marrow transplant. They tested me, and everything seemed great, but,” her voice was thick with tears, “he didn’t want it. He just refused.

“We tried everything, but he wouldn’t even speak to me. It’s just so tragically ironic. Finally, I can help my son, help him survive, but he doesn’t want me to. What kind of mother does that make me?” Her voice broke.

Asher had to swallow. This was more than he had bargained for. He didn't know what to respond. Awkwardly, he said, "I, uh… I'm done with the exam, Mrs. Chapman."

She gingerly turned around to lie on her back, her eyes teary. She quickly wiped at her cheeks with one hand, letting out an embarrassed chuckle. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to dump all this on you."

He met her eyes. "There's no need to apologize. And I'm very sorry to hear about your son."

She gave him a sad smile. "So to go back to your question, yes, the bone marrow was supposed to go to my son, but when he refused, I figured that if I couldn't help *him*, then at least I could help another person. They found a matching recipient very quickly, and here I am."

"And I'm sure your bone marrow recipient will be incredibly thankful. You may have saved a life, and that's never something you should regret. We'll just need to confirm a few more lab results, and if everything checks out, we will be doing the surgery first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Dr. …? Sorry, I forgot your name."

"Wolke."

"Thank you, Dr. Wolke."

Asher went to leave, but from the corner of his eye, he noticed that Murphy hadn't moved. Had he forgotten anything? "Dr. Murphy?" he inquired. He lifted his hand, then let it hang in the air. Dr. Browne had mentioned early on that Murphy didn't like to be touched.

The patient was also looking at him questioningly. Murphy looked lost in thought. Wolke wasn't sure what to do. "Dr. Murphy?" he tried again, this time lightly tapping him on the shoulder.

Murphy flinched and Asher withdrew his hand. Murphy said nothing, turned on his heel and left the room. Asher frowned but followed.

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Aaron's day had been busy—flu season at the clinic was never fun, but now that the bulk of patients had been taken care of, he finally had some time to catch a breath.

His mind wandered back to the conversation he'd had with Lea earlier, and he knew Shaun was working the second shift today. He looked at his watch. Medical emergencies or surgeries notwithstanding, Shaun was a creature of habit, and if he went to the cafeteria in five minutes, there was a good chance he might catch him for his usual dinner sandwich.

Aaron decided he might just get some soup or whatever else the cafeteria had on offer for the night. Maybe it was a welcome avoidance strategy not to have dinner at home, alone.

The house felt very empty with Debbie not there, and he wasn't sure what to do about that. The topic of divorce had come up already, and it wasn't like he hadn't considered it before they actually vocalized it, if he was being completely honest. But, goddammit, it made him feel like a complete failure.

He'd already tanked one marriage, and the reason had been so much more insurmountable than the fundamentals of firearm possession. Sure, his issues with Debbie weren't just about the gun. The whole thing had been knee-jerk and impulsive, but it had felt so good.

What was it that had driven him to her? Was he just desperate because he didn't want to end up isolated and alone? Wasn't there enough between them that was left to salvage? Could they not try harder? Maybe he could take a page from Shaun's book.

The last remnants of evening light shone through the large glass façade, the streetlights outside flickering on one by one. Tomato soup with rice was a good choice, he knew, unless they'd changed the recipe again. He hoped not.

He sat down at one of the tables, studying the other patrons. A lot of familiar scrubs or white coat clad colleagues, some of them nodding to him politely. It made him realize how long he'd worked at this hospital.

He looked over to the cafeteria counter, and sure enough, there was Shaun, picking out one of the sandwiches from the display. Aaron called his name and indicated for Shaun to join him.

Armed with a tray, a glass of orange juice and the sandwich, Shaun sat down opposite Aaron. "Hello, Dr. Glassman. It's past 6 pm, should… you not be at home?"

Aaron couldn't help but smile. "That's a very astute observation, and yes, I probably should be, but I wanted to talk to you."

Shaun bit off his sandwich corner and said nothing. Aaron studied him. He seemed his usual self.

"Are you okay?"

Shaun's eyes briefly flickered up to Aaron's face, then back to his plate. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You know you can come talk to me if you're having trouble with something, right?"

"Yes, I know." He kept chewing.

"Because… you know, maybe today is a difficult day…?"

Shaun now looked up. "Did Lea talk to you?"

He sighed. "Yeah, she did. She was worried, and quite frankly, now I'm a little bit worried, too."

"I'm fine," Shaun repeated off-handedly. "I have a patient with a herniated disc that is compressing on the spinal nerves, but the surgery is going to be very complicated because of previous scarring from an automotive accident and could leave the patient paralyzed. He is 37 years old and leads a very active lifestyle. It would be very bad if he lost function of his legs."

Okay, Glassman thought. This was usual Shaun. It wasn't distraught Shaun or emotionally troubled Shaun or even trying-to-figure-out-how-to-process-things Shaun. Maybe there was no need to worry.

"Yeah," Aaron responded, "That sounds pretty bad. Who's doing the surgery?"

"Dr. Iyengar."

"She's the Head of Orthopedics. Why are you on her service?"

"Her fourth year resident is on unexpected sick leave, and Dr. Andrews asked for a volunteer. Dr. Park and I drew straws, except it wasn't really straws, it was pencils. He pulled the shorter one."

“Well, good for you, then.”

“Dr. Iyengar is a very skilled surgeon, I can learn a lot from her.”

“Yes, she is. In fact, I was the one who hired her in the first place, and haven’t regretted it since.”

“How did you know I would be a good surgeon?”

Where was this suddenly coming from? “Shaun, I’ve known you since you were fourteen. I saw what you were capable of.”

“You also saw what I was not capable of.”

“Yeah, I did, but you were so smart, and so determined. You just needed a little extra help and someone who believed in you. And I wasn’t wrong, was I? You’re an amazing surgeon.”

“But how could you be sure? You risked your job to hire me. And then you lost it because you hired me.”

“You can never be *sure*, Shaun. But that’s life. You gotta take risks to achieve great things. Otherwise you’ll never get anywhere in life.”

“Do you not have regrets?”

“Oh, sure I do. Everyone has regrets. But not about hiring *you*. Are you having doubts that you’re a good surgeon?”

“Hm. No. I think I’m a good surgeon. Dr. Andrews must think so, too, because otherwise he would not have let me join Dr. Iyengar’s team.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Shaun took the last bite of his sandwich. “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Aaron readily agreed.

He watched Shaun put the plastic tray in one of the tray carts and tried to ignore the fact that there was still a slight worry nagging at the pit of his stomach.

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Lea was already in bed when Shaun got home that night, trying to decide whether she liked this Canadian detective novel enough to finish or not. He poked his head into the bedroom. “Hello, Lea.”

“Hey. Did your day go okay?”

He picked up his pajamas. “I assisted the Head of Orthopedics on a herniated disc repair. It went very well. She’s a very skilled orthopedic surgeon. I will tell you about it later.”

She smiled. That was a 100% Shaun.

He came back ten minutes later, smelling of minty toothpaste and lemon ginger soap and Lea put her novel aside as he joined her in bed.

“How was your day?” he asked.

“Okay. Nothing special. I doubt you wanna hear about staff meetings and external provider telephone conferences.”

“Do you want to hear about my surgery?”

“If you spare me the gory details about body fluids and compound fractures, sure.”

“We haven’t treated any compound fractures for several weeks.”

“Well, I’ll consider that a blessing, then. Cause those are just… ick. Please don’t tell me about compound fractures, even if you treat any, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll add that to the list.”

She turned to lie on her side so she could look at him. “You have a list of things not to tell me about?”

“Hm. Yes. It’s not very long.”

“What’s on it?”

“Sex with Carly, me listening to you making sex noises with other men, movies that have Tilda Swinton in it, kale smoothies, the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard. And compound fractures.”

“Ugh, yeah, that’s a good list. I think you should add Hamilton to it.”

“The 18th century politician?”

“No, the musical. About the 18th century politician.”

“Oh. I wouldn’t talk to you about that because I don’t know anything about musicals, but I’ll add it to the list anyway.”

“Thank you. Can’t stand the guy.”

“Alexander Hamilton?”

“No, the… what’s the guy’s name? Manuel-Lin… something.”

A confused frown appeared on Shaun’s forehead. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You know what, it’s fine. You don’t need to know about 21st century musical trivia.”

“Morgan likes musicals. I could ask her about that.”

“Please don’t. Or… if you do, please don’t tell me about it.”

“Yes. It’s already on the list. What do you want to know about my herniated disc surgery?”

“I don’t know. Dazzle me.”

He went into a monologue recounting the highlights of the surgery, and even though Lea couldn't follow all of it, he tried his best to explain it in layman's terms. She didn't really mind. It was always so satisfying to see him being enthusiastic and happy, and she relished every second of it.

"Dr. Iyengar let me lead the closing, that was very nice of her. She complimented my suturing technique."

"That sounds awesome, Shaunie. Did you like working with her?"

"Yes. But I also like working with Dr. Lim and Dr. Andrews. I don't think I will be working much with Dr. Iyengar in the future."

"Well, never say never, right?"

She studied him, saw the tiny little smile hidden there on his face, and she wondered… Had he found some kind of closure for his Steve conundrum? Had he simply let the distraction from work push it into the background and so that he wasn't dwelling on it anymore?

She didn't want to dredge it up again, so she just took what she could get. She still heard Glassman's words. "Let him come to us." She hoped he would if there was a need for it.

He was slowly blinking his eyes, his eyelids drooping. It had probably been a long and taxing day for him. "What do you say, let's call it a night?"

"Okay," he said, and it sounded tired already.

"Good night, Shaun."

"Good night, Lea."

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"Hello, Mrs. Chapman," Shaun greeted his patient as he entered her room.

"Dr. Murphy," she said. She had awoken from general anesthesia a few hours ago, and Shaun was double-checking some of her test results. "Is everything okay?"

Asher had made him aware of a slightly elevated WBC, which might be an early sign of infection. Shaun was about to tell her that, but then hesitated.

He'd learned so many lessons about communication with patients, but it was still confusing to him what was the right thing to say when. However, something in the back of his mind recalled the lesson of not unnecessarily worrying patients if there was not clear confirmation or reasonable suspicion.

"We are just monitoring you to ensure everything is well. You are not running a fever, and your vital signs are stable, so that is good."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it."

Shaun checked the monitor again, then the IV drips and perfusor. Everything seemed to be in order. He'd ask Asher to recheck the blood later. He had something else on his mind, though. He stood by the side of the bed.

“Why did you not try harder to care for your son?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you gave up your son because it was too hard for you to care for him. There are support programs for single mothers you could have applied for. There are also financial aid programs and Medicaid.”

“Uhm. That’s a rather personal question, and if I’m quite honest, I don’t appreciate being accused like this by total strangers.” Her tone seemed brusque.

He looked at her face, tried to read her expression. He wasn’t sure if he had upset her. He probably had. She didn’t look happy. Did he have to apologize?

“I’m sorry,” he said. He wasn’t sure if it was placating her. “I probably shouldn’t have asked that question.”

She narrowed her eyes, seemed to size him up. “You’re… different, aren’t you?”

“I have autism.”

“Okay. Now, if you’ll allow me to counter that with a personal question of my own. Am I completely off-base when I assume your mother gave you up as a child?”

He was taken aback. How had she come to that conclusion? “My mother didn’t give me up,” he stated. “My brother and I ran away. Our parents didn’t want us.”

She gestured at the chair next to her bed. “Here, sit with me.”

Shaun hesitated. Did he want that? But maybe she would answer his questions, give him more insight if he tried carefully to ask them the right way.

Mrs. Chapman looked at him. “Want to tell me your story?”

He wasn’t sure how much he should be disclosing. After all, she was right, they were total strangers, other than that he’d operated on her and managed her medical care. Better stick to the basics. “My father was an alcoholic and my mother didn’t do anything to stop that. When he killed my pet, my brother and I left, and we never went back home.”

His eyes flickered to the vital signs monitor. Everything still looked normal. He waited for her response.

“That’s a terrible story, I’m really sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You don’t know me, we are strangers.”

“Because that sounds like something no child should ever go through. But while I see the parallels, that’s not exactly *my* story. I gave up my son, not because I didn’t care—quite the opposite. I cared so much that I wanted him to have a better life than I knew I could give him.”

“Is… that not something you tell yourself to make you feel less guilty for not trying harder?”

She shifted in her bed, and Shaun was alarmed. Had he said something else inappropriate again?

“Look, under normal circumstances, I would be ending this conversation right here, but I understand that this is very personal for you, and you have questions you want answered. But don’t you think you’re being a bit quick to judge?”

Was he? This mother had given up her child, she had taken the easy way out instead of trying harder to change, trying to give her son a life with the mother he deserved.

“Am I offending you?”

“Quite frankly, you are. A little. You don’t know my history, my situation. When you look at me, all you see is a mother who abandoned her child, but it isn’t always that black and white, Dr. Murphy. I acted out of the best of my intentions, and please know that I didn’t make that decision lightly.

“I wrestled with it over and over. And I tried. I was young, and… caring for a severely disabled child took everything I had, until I had nothing left to give. Please know that this decision was the hardest I ever had to make in my life, and I still ask myself every single day if it was the right one. Can I ask if you have children?”

“No,” he stated simply.

“Well, no offense, but until you become a parent, I don’t think you’re truly going to know what it’s like to love someone so much that you’re willing to give them up, just so that they can have a better life.”

He pondered that. He *had* been a parent—for a split second. It was hard for him to think of his unborn daughter in such abstract terms when he’d never seen her or held her in his arms, seen her grow up.

How could he know what he would have been willing to do for his daughter? And what was it that had kept his own mother from making such sacrifices? “I don’t think our mother loved me and my brother enough to care.”

“Well, I don’t know your mother or your brother, so I’m not really in a position to comment on that. I’m guessing you were still young when this happened?”

“I was fourteen. My brother was twelve.”

“Your mother, did she ever reach out to you again?”

“I saw her when my father died. She told me she missed me. I didn’t miss her.”

“Can I ask if you went into the foster system? Did the two of you grow up in a foster family?”

“My brother died. I stayed in foster homes and foster families until I was able to live on my own.”

“You were never adopted?”

“No.”

She let out a long breath, and Shaun thought she looked sad. “I’m really sorry you had to go through that, Dr. Murphy. But I can also tell that you’ve turned out a good man, and what I can only assume is a—”

It was at that moment that Asher came hurrying into the room, slightly out of breath. “I’m sorry, Dr. Murphy, I got held up at the cath lab.”

Shaun turned to look at him. “That’s okay. We’re done here.” He turned back to the patient. “Thank you, Mrs. Chapman.”

She gave him a smile. Maybe it was supposed to be encouraging. Maybe it was pity. Or maybe it was both. “Thank you for telling me your story, Dr. Murphy.”

“There’s no need to thank me. Dr. Wolke will be back with you later to retest your blood.”

“I am?” Asher said, then harrumphed and quickly corrected himself. “Yes, I am.”

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Shaun stood at the back of the elevator, riding down. It dinged and the doors opened. A nurse got in and pushed the button to the ground floor. Shaun ignored her.

‘All I ever wanted was to figure out a way to move past… everything. I wanted us to be a family again.’

Shaun thought about that morning at Hilltop’s Diner. The smell of coffee and fryer grease, the taste of the chocolate chip pancakes sweet on his tongue. His mother had worn a green jacket and red lipstick. Her perfume had been flowery and too cloying.

‘I don’t blame you for hating us. We were young, stupid.’

That was what Mrs. Chapman had said. She was young. Was she stupid, too? She didn’t seem stupid.

‘There was so much we didn’t understand about… you. And what you needed from us.’

Mrs. Chapman had given up her son, but she’d understood him. She’d understood what he needed. And she thought she couldn’t give it to him. She needed someone else to give him what he needed.

‘We missed you. So much.’

His mother’s hug hadn’t felt good. She was a stranger. He didn’t like to be touched by strangers. But he knew she had wanted it. So he’d let her.

The elevator dinged again, this was his floor. He got out.

The way to Dr. Glassman’s office was familiar. The linoleum floor was beige with brown highlights towards the walls. There was a scuff in the flooring near Dr. Mankopf’s office door. The planter with the yucca tree on the corner looked like it could use being watered.

Shaun stopped in his tracks when he rounded the corner. The blinds of Dr. Glassman’s office window were closed, the voices loud, angry, familiar. Shaun could hear every word, even through the closed door.

“—then why did you ask me here, Aaron?!” It was Debbie.

“I don’t know!” he yelled. “Maybe I thought we could reconcile. Try again?”

“Try again?! For the how many-eth time now?”

“You said you loved me, has that changed?”

“And I said it wasn’t enough. Have *you* changed? Has anything changed?”

“I… I don’t know. Has it?”

There was a brief silence, then, “This is pointless. I have an appointment with my lawyer tomorrow. Expect the divorce papers before the end of the month. I hope you’ll sign them.”

“Debbie…”

“No. Goodbye, Aaron.”

Shaun flinched and took an involuntary step back when the door flew open and Debbie rushed out. He lifted his arm to greet her. “Hello, Deb—”

She didn’t dignify him with so much of a glance and hurried past. Shaun stood in the corridor, uncertain what to do. Divorce. That was bad.

Shaun neared the office door. The name tag was grey with white lettering. He knocked twice, then opened the door, testing the waters.

Dr. Glassman was sitting behind his desk, his head in his hands. That wasn’t good.

“Dr. Glassman?”

His head shot up. He didn’t say anything.

“Are you getting divorced?” Shaun asked.

Glassman glared at him. “What do you want, Shaun?” It sounded hostile.

“I… have a patient.”

“Yes, Shaun, you always have a patient. You have a patient with some kind of problem and then you come to me and expect me to be your sage advice person, but guess what, Shaun. I’m *not*, okay? I can’t always be the first person you run to and expect to solve all your problems!”

Shaun tensed and his shoulders drew up. “This patient doesn’t have a problem. She gave up her son because he had cerebral palsy, and she said—”

“Shaun!” Glassman spat at him. Shaun flinched. “Don’t you see that this is a bad time? Can’t you understand that I can’t be your go-to person?! I don’t care about your patient, or whatever pointless thing it is that you’re ruminating on. I can’t give you advice right now!”

He stood stiffly. “Are… you mad that Debbie wants to divorce you?”

“Yes, Shaun! Yes, I’m very mad!”

“She did not seem to be—”

“Oh my God, Shaun!” Glassman yelled. “Stop! What part of ‘I don’t want to talk to you’ did you not understand!? Get out!”

Shaun recoiled, lifting his hands to his ears. He didn’t like loud voices. He especially hated it when Dr. Glassman got angry. “I… just want to—”

“Get out,” Glassman repeated. He still sounded mad. His eyes were wide and intense.

Shaun hesitated another two seconds, then said, “Okay.”

He turned around and walked away. Sometimes Dr. Glassman would call after him. He didn’t today. That must mean he was really angry.

Shaun hated it. His hand went into his pants pocket, seeking out the familiar fabric of the dark blue wrapping cloth. It was still there. He let out a shaky breath through his nose.

Dr. Glassman was getting divorced, and he’d yelled at Shaun, and everything was wrong. Someone was laughing behind him, high-pitched and piercing. Shaun blinked.

“Hey, wait up!” a stranger yelled after someone, jogging past. Shaun jumped.

Lea. He could talk to Lea. She’d understand. She’d know what to say.

Lea wasn’t in her office, and Shaun started pacing. Where was she? Had she gone home? No, her computer screen was still on. There were post-its on her whiteboard, but the colors didn’t match, and they were askew. They needed to be in a straight line. It was all he could see.

His right hand went into his hair, but it did nothing to calm him. Dr. Glassman was angry and sad, and he wouldn’t let Shaun help. His patient had loved her son and still given him up, and his own mother, what had *she* done? Why had she not loved him and Steve enough? Why had she not gotten help? What was—

“Shaun?”

He whipped around. It was Lea.

“Shaun, what’s wrong?”

His breath was unsteady and her voice was…

“Shaun. Please talk to me.”

… like an anchor.

He stopped. Lea was right there, in front of him. Her voice was low, soothing. “Hey.”

He sucked in a breath, tried to focus. “Dr. Glassman yelled at me.”

“What? Why? Here, sit down.”

“No.” Shaun started pacing again. “He is angry. Debbie wants to divorce him.”

“What?”

“She was in his office, and they yelled at each other, and then she said she will have her lawyer prepare the divorce papers.”

Lea stood patiently, watching him. “Okay.”

“No. That’s not okay. It will make Dr. Glassman very sad and very angry.”

“Well, yes, but that’s not something that you can do anything about. That’s something the two of them need to work out amongst each other.”

“He already got divorced once, he will not want to get divorced again. It will make him feel very bad.”

Lea sighed. “Shaun.” It sounded like those times where she didn’t understand. Or where she thought *he* didn’t understand. “I know you love Glassy, and you don’t want him to get hurt, but there’s just some things that you can’t fix. Things that aren’t fixable. And I think Glassy’s second marriage may be one of those things. Sometimes you just gotta accept that, close that chapter in your life, and move on.”

Move on. Moving on was accepting failure. Vera had talked about it, too. Back at the collapsed brewery. He hated that term.

He stopped pacing. Lea took a step closer. “Why did Dr. Glassman yell at you? Did you say something to him?”

“No.”

“He wouldn’t just yell at you for no reason.”

“I wanted his advice. He was angry and said he doesn’t care about my problems. Then he told me to get out of his office.”

“Yeah,” she said in a gentle voice. “He was upset and your timing wasn’t great. He probably didn’t mean it.”

“How would you know?”

“I wouldn’t, but that’s what happens when people get upset. Emotions run high, and people get… irrational. They say things in the heat of the moment they don’t mean. Remember when you wanted to smash my car with a baseball bat? You said things you didn’t mean, that you later regretted, didn’t you?”

He sighed. “I did.” He didn’t like to be reminded of that particular night. He wasn’t proud of it.

“Your advice,” she said, “Is that something I can help with?”

“I don’t think so.”

She smiled at him. “Okay. Well, if you change your mind, you can come talk to me about it, okay? Maybe tonight when we’re both home. You don’t have to. I’m just putting it out there.”

He knew he could. He could come to her with anything. He nodded.

“Hey,” she prompted. “You look like you could use a hug. Do you want a hug?”

Yes, he very much wanted a hug, and she didn't need to ask for permission, but he loved that sometimes she still did. "Yes."

Her arm came around him, and he felt warm and at home and grounded. "Thank you," he said in her ear.

"Any time."

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It was one of those days where Shaun's and Lea both finished work around the same time and got to ride home together. They were almost there now, traffic had been pleasantly mellow, and Lea looked over to Shaun when they stopped at a red light.

He was leaning his head against the passenger side window, his eyes lazily trained on the dashboard. He looked miles away, and Lea knew better than to disturb his train of thought. He was probably still contemplating his Glassman encounter from earlier.

The radio was playing at low volume—an old Nirvana song from the 90's. She lightly drummed her fingers on the steering wheel along with the drum beat and hummed the melody.

"Do you like that song?"

Heh, Shaun *was* paying attention, after all. She smiled. "I do."

"What is it called?"

"This one? 'Come As You Are'. You know, 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is the song everyone always thinks of when they hear *Nirvana*, but I think 'Come As You Are' is far superior. Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure."

That usually meant no when he didn't want to offend her. "You can say no, Shaunie."

"Maybe I will listen to it again."

"I'll put it on your Spotify playlist."

"Okay."

She pulled into her parking spot outside the apartment building. "Well, here we are."

"Have you thought about what we are going to have for dinner?"

"Can't say I have. Don't feel like cooking a big meal. You?"

"Hm."

"What do we have in terms of canned goods? You know, other than the three million cans of peas."

"It's not three million, it's six. None of them expire before 2023."

"Well, that's good to know."

“There’s olives, chickpeas, baby corn, diced tomatoes, pineapple, tropical fruit salad, the macaroni & cheese you like but I don’t, and a jar of pickles which I won’t eat, but you know that.”

“Yeah, none of that sounds enticing.”

They arrived at the apartment door and Shaun unlocked it. “We have cup noodles. I think there are four left.”

She hung her jacket. “I don’t know. That doesn’t sound super enticing either, does it?”

He shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

“Oh well, then I guess cup noodles it is. I’m sorry you got stuck with the non-homemaker fiancé.”

He looked at her inquisitively. “Why would I be sorry? You work a full time job, like I do, and yours pays considerably more than mine. That’s more important than having time to home-cook meals.”

She turned to look at him. “You know what, Shaunie? You’re totally right. We can spend all of our hard earned money on all the cup noodles in the world.”

“N-no. That would be irresponsible, and we wouldn’t have space to store them all.”

She laughed. “Sarcasm. Remember?”

He drew a face. “I do. But not always at the right time.”

She went over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. “It’s fine. I love you anyway.”

He went to the kitchen cupboard and checked the contents. “I was wrong. We have two chicken, one seafood, one Batchoy and one curry extra spicy. Which one do you want?”

“The curry sounds good. You?”

“I’m fine with chicken.”

“Okay. Sounds like we’re all set, then.”

While Shaun was making the noodles, Lea slipped into some more comfortable clothes. When she came out of the bedroom, she couldn’t help but notice that the picture frame with Shaun and Steve’s portrait was still lying face-down on the shelf.

What had his relationship with Steve been like, she wondered. She knew bits and pieces, of course, but it wasn’t something Shaun talked about very often.

“Do you want to eat on the couch?” Shaun asked from over in the kitchen.

“Yeah, sure. If we’re already doing the low-effort cheapo student meal thing, we might as well do it properly.”

It wasn’t long before Shaun brought over two light blue soup bowls that were filled with steaming cup noodles, a spoon handle sticking out of each.

“Oh wow, this is way more sophisticated than I expected. I thought we were gonna do the whole plastic packaging thing.”

He hesitated. “Do… you want me to transfer it back to the plastic cups?”

She chuckled. “No. This is perfect. Maybe if we imagine hard enough, it could almost taste like homemade soup.”

He chose not to comment and sat down next to her. “Do you want to watch TV?”

“I don’t know. We can put on the Weather Channel if you want.”

“You don’t like the Weather Channel.”

“No, I don’t dislike the Weather Channel, I just don’t get the same enjoyment out of watching the Weather Channel as you do.”

“Which is not that different from disliking the Weather Channel.”

“Let’s put it this way. I don’t feel strongly either way about the Weather Channel. Come on, let’s check out those New Hampshire snowstorms and Idaho cyclones.”

“Are you making fun of me?” He put a spoonful of noodles in his mouth.

“No. It’s called harmless teasing.” She took the remote control and switched on the TV. And sure enough, there was a guy in a winter jacket standing in the middle of a snowstorm, talking into a microphone. It was North Dakota, not New Hampshire.

When they had both finished their meals, the bowls now empty on the coffee table, she looked over at Shaun. He was still watching the weather news, his features relaxed. He seemed content. Was this really the right time to breach the subject of Steve? But if not now, then when?

“Shaun?” she tried carefully.

“Hm?” he hummed.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

His eyes widened for the briefest of moments. Gone was the relaxation, to be replaced with instant disconcertment. She immediately felt sorry for her somewhat clumsy attempt, but now it was too late. She might as well see it through.

She drew up one leg under her and shifted her position so that she could face him. She pointed to the shelf where the picture frame lay. “What happened there?”

“Nothing,” he evaded.

“I’m guessing the frame didn’t fall over.”

“It didn’t.”

“So this was about Steve’s birthday, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you put it like that so that you wouldn’t be reminded, because it was too painful?”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “I didn’t want to look at Steve.”

“Why?”

“Because it made me feel sad, and I don’t understand why it made me feel that way. Steve has been dead for a long time, and I had accepted that.”

“Shaun, I never really know what’s going on in your head, but this is normal. It’s part of the grieving process. And even if Steve died a long time ago, it doesn’t mean you can’t still miss him. *Especially* on his birthday. That’s not something you need to hide from.”

“I don’t like missing Steve.”

“Yeah, and that’s normal, too. What do you miss the most about him?”

“Hm. A lot of things. The way he always knew what to do when I was agitated. The way he made meatballs taste good, 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.” 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 have 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. After he died, 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 also have that photo of you and Steve, the both of you in a bus.”

He nodded. “We lived there until Steve died. We slept on old gymnastics mats and 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. “I think I’d like to stop talking about Steve now.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’m really glad you told me all this, though.”

“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.”

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

“Lea?” he asked. His eyes focused on something in the distance.

“Yes, Shaun?”

“Do you think my mother has regrets?”

Whoa. Where was this coming from? “I… don’t know. Do you?”

“When I spoke with her at the diner, she told me that she wanted us to be a family again. She said she was young and stupid and didn’t know how to help me. And that she and my father missed me.”

“Yeah, but that’s easy to say now. And it doesn’t change the fact that she was a terrible parent, that she abandoned her children and did absolutely nothing to support you.”

Shaun drew in a long breath. He had his hands folded in his lap, rubbing the tips of his thumbs against each other. “Asher and I have a patient. A mother with a deep hematoma that developed as a complication of a bone marrow donation.

“She wanted to donate bone marrow for her son who has Hodgkin’s lymphoma, but her son refused the donation because she gave him up as a child and he hates her for it.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“She told me she questions her decision every day, and even though she said it was the only way to help her child, I think she regrets that decision.”

“Did she say why she gave up her son?”

“He has severe cerebral palsy and needs constant care. She said her husband left and she couldn’t take care of her son on her own.”

“Yeah, but that’s a whole different situation, isn’t it? Your mother made a conscious choice to stay with your father—an alcoholic who abused his children, *and* his wife. I mean, sure, your mother probably has lots of regrets. She’d be a monster if she didn’t. But I also think, mostly, that’s guilt. Guilt over being a terrible mother, guilt over not doing more, guilt over her failure to care for her children.”

“Is that not the same thing?”

“Guilt and remorse? No, not really. You can feel guilty without feeling remorse.”

“Hm.”

Yeah, this was probably difficult for Shaun to understand. And it made her think of something else. “Shaun?”

His gaze flickered over to her face—briefly. “You often talk about your ASD, and all the issues that come along with it. But I wonder if you understand that that’s not all it is. All this childhood trauma you’ve been through, a lot of that isn’t necessarily tied to your ASD.

“I’m not a counselor or a psychiatrist, but I think it’s pretty obvious that all of that has left a really significant mark. And sometimes that bubbles back up to the surface, like when you’re afraid that people are going to leave you, or when you get scared that you can’t do something, that you’ll fail at something. That has nothing to do with your ASD, and everything with your abusive family history. You get that, right?”

He was blinking slowly, looking straight ahead. “So how do I fix that?”

She slowly shook her head. It was so very Shaun. “I don’t know if that can be fixed. I mean, if you really wanted, you could probably try counseling sessions. That kind of childhood trauma is usually what people seek psychological help for. I’m sure there’s support groups, too. But your ASD, I don’t know, I think it makes you process those things differently than other people. But I’ll help you look into it, if you want to.”

He stayed quiet for a long moment. “I’ll… think about it.”

“Yeah. Let me know if you make up your mind, and we’ll look into it together.”

“Lea?”

She looked at him, and there was only warmth and gratitude and a deep affection in his eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He took her hand and drew her towards him, and his lips were soft on hers. His hands gently cupped her jaw, and she drank in every piece of his love, a warm and joyful feeling spreading from the center throughout her whole body.

She let him break the kiss in his own time, and when he did, she told him, “If I hadn’t already asked you to marry me, I would do it all over again right now.”

“And I would say yes again.”

“You make me so happy.”

“You make me happy, too.”

She beamed at him. “I know.”

He gave her a mischievous look. “Can we have sex?”

She chuckled. “Yes, Shaun, we absolutely can.”

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Aaron hated driving downtown. It was always busy, you had to look out extra carefully for pedestrians, and you could never find a damn parking spot, especially in the evenings. Still, Lea had asked him to come, and so he had said yes.

His mind wandered back to his conversation he’d had with Shaun that morning over their usual Monday morning breakfast. Aaron had apologized for his outburst last week, but Shaun hadn’t seemed particularly perturbed and easily accepted the apology.

It was amazing how far he’d come, especially these past few years. This job, his new friends, all the learning experiences and opportunities—it had shaped him into a whole new person.

They’d also talked about the impending divorce, and Shaun had vocalized concerns about Aaron’s well-being. It was touching, and it made perfect sense, now that Shaun himself was getting married. But Aaron knew it would have to be his own problem to work through, and not something he should be dragging Shaun into.

And then the phone call and invite from Lea, it had seemed somewhat timely. He suspected it had something to do with the wedding. Maybe she wanted him to do a speech? He doubted she’d ask him to be Shaun’s Best Man. Shaun probably didn’t care much either way, he wasn’t big on traditions. In fact, he was probably pretty oblivious to most of that.

Aaron wondered… Was he going to walk in on wedding catalogues and guest lists and flower arrangements? He’d never cared much for that kind of thing, either. He hoped she knew that part, or at the very least could guess.

Arriving at door number 24, he knocked. Lea opened, and he took a cautious peek. No catalogues, no cake tasting, no wild arrangement of papers strewn all across the table. He took that as a good sign.

“Dr. Glassman.”

“Hello, Lea,” he greeted back as he walked in. The apartment seemed empty otherwise. “Shaun not here?”

“No, he’s still at the hospital.”

She gestured for him to sit down at the table, which he did. “I can offer you water or orange juice. I think there’s a can of Coke left in the fridge, if that’s your kind of thing. I’m guessing you drove here, otherwise I’d offer you beer or wine.”

“Water’s fine,” he said.

She got him a glass from the kitchen faucet. He waited until she sat down opposite him. “So this is… the ‘we need to talk’ conversation that’s been a long time coming?”

“No,” she answered. “I mean, maybe a little. But not what you probably think.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, so what am I probably thinking?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. What *are* you thinking?”

“Well, for starters there’s still that whole ‘Glassman doesn’t like Lea’ elephant in the room, right?”

“Is there? I have a distinct recollection that we already talked about that, but then again I don’t think we really truly did, did we?”

He let out a sigh. “Okay, so for the record let it be said that, when Shaun first met you, I may not have liked you very much. I wasn’t sure of your intentions, and I may have been a little bit right, but maybe,” he cocked his head, “since then, you managed to change my mind. You’re good for Shaun, and I think he may be good for you, too.

“I’m not a fan of the snarkiness and the flippancy, but the two of you are getting married now, so it’s not like I really have much of a choice than to like you, do I?”

Her mouth curved into a grin. “Well, look at that. A rare moment of honesty.”

He lifted his hands. “So, is that what you thought I was thinking?”

“Yeah, pretty close, but still not the ‘we need to talk’ conversation I was going for.”

“Which is?”

“The *other* elephant in the room.”

“There’s another elephant?”

“Yeah, the paternal one, with a sign on his forehead that says, ‘I will trample you if you mention this to anyone’.”

He squinted his eyes, not sure where this was going. She went on, “Look, I know the whole thing is awkward, but you’re the closest thing Shaun has to a father. I know neither of you like to actually say it out loud, because then it’ll be out there and it’ll be weird, but I think it’s time we talked about that. Because Shaun is getting married, and there is no way he doesn’t want the person he actually considers a father to do all the groomy fathery things for his wedding.

“He probably won’t ask you, because he’s Shaun, and maybe he’s also a little clueless about wedding traditions, but,” she met his eyes, “I know it would mean a lot to him.”

Goddammit, Lea, he thought. She was making him tear up, and of course that meant she wasn’t wrong. He blinked. “And what makes you think I wasn’t going to do that anyway?”

Her voice was gentle. “I didn’t, but I wanted to make sure that you understood it. Because I love him, and I want the people that love him the most to be there for him on the biggest day of his life.”

He shook his head slightly. “This is actually a little insulting that you thought I wasn’t going to be there for him on his wedding day. You know that I—” his voice broke a little and he lowered his gaze. “that I *love* him. I love him like a son.”

Silence hung heavy as he intently studied the wood grain of the tabletop, there was a knothole right there.

“Aaron,” she said in a low voice, and that caught his attention because she had never called him by his first name. “We never talk about this either, but I can only imagine this is hard for you.”

His face twitched, but she went on, “Shaun never really told me the whole story, but I know you lost your daughter when she was a teenager, and there’s a great deal of baggage to unpack there. Maybe that’s part of why you keep sticking to the whole mentor spiel instead of calling it for what it actually is, why you’re afraid to say it out loud.

“But don’t you think there’d be a whole lot of healing involved if you actually could? For the both of you.”

Aaron looked at Lea, tried to find something there that was new. They hadn’t talked about it outright during that trip to Casper, but she’d seen where he’d been coming from—if not necessarily understood it at the time. And now, she had carried and lost a child. That kind of thing changed a person.

And what about Shaun? Where was he standing? Would he want this? Aaron rubbed an eyebrow with three fingers. “Shaun once told me he hated fathers. And can you blame him?”

“Yeah, but that was the douchebag who raised him speaking, who doesn’t deserve that title because he barely even did *that*. You did an amazing thing for him, and you know that he wouldn’t be here, that he wouldn’t be the man he is today, if it wasn’t for you.”

He felt the tears prickling at his eyes, Lea’s words hitting home in more ways than she could ever imagine.

“You *are* his father. The one he never had when he was growing up.”

His hand went to his mouth, pressing against it, his forehead twisting into furrows as the tears inevitably fell. She shifted in her seat, and maybe she was trying to reach out, but he didn’t know what to do with it.

The silence stretched and coalesced into a thick blanket. Just as he was about to meet her gaze, there was a noise from the door, a key turning in the lock, the door opening. Leave it to Shaun to have the most impeccable timing.

“Hello,” he greeted them cheerfully as he entered, adding a surprised, “Dr. Glassman.”

Aaron quickly wiped at his cheeks, which didn’t slip past Shaun’s keen senses. He stopped in his tracks. “Are you crying?”

Aaron chuckled and shook his head, choosing not to comment on that. Shaun’s expression was suddenly worried. “Did something bad happen? Did your cancer come back?”

“No,” Aaron quickly said. “Nothing bad happened.”

“Then why are you crying?”

Lea got up and walked over to Shaun. “Come, sit down with us. I think you should be part of this conversation, too.” When he looked slightly alarmed, she lightly touched his arm. “Don’t worry, Shaun, it’s all good.”

“Is this… about the wedding?” Shaun sat down next to Lea opposite Aaron.

“No,” Lea said. “Well, maybe a little bit.”

Shaun looked right at Aaron. “Have you changed your mind about me and Lea getting married?”

“Changed my mind? What do you mean?”

“I didn’t think you approved of our marriage.”

“What? No, Shaun, I never said that.”

Lea’s gaze was now on Aaron, sharp and inquisitive, in a ‘I wanna hear this too’ sort of way.

His face fell. This conversation had suddenly taken a totally wrong turn, and he desperately wanted the car to turn around. Lea’s tone was slightly acerbic. “So you don’t actually approve of the wedding.”

“No,” he emphasized again, “That’s not what I’m saying at all. It’s just… It’s a big step. It should be well considered. Have you really thought about this, talked about this?”

Lea bristled. “You’re the one to talk. You proposed to your not-quite-anymore wife after all of three dates and a muffin.”

“Yeah,” he shot back, “and that was a mistake.”

“And maybe that’s why you shouldn’t be giving your *son*,” she put emphasis on the word, “advice about whom to marry when and why.”

Shaun seemed to be somewhat flustered. “Does Dr. Glassman have a son who is getting married?”

Lea drew in a breath. “No, Shaun. Well, actually he does. This is what he and I were talking about before you came in. God, this is not how I imagined this conversation was gonna go.”

Shaun frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No.” She touched his forearm, her voice suddenly more gentle. “No, you didn’t say anything wrong. Maybe I should let the two of you talk.”

Aaron got up. “Or maybe I should leave.”

“No,” Lea said immediately. “You are not going to run away from this conversation.”

“I am very confused,” Shaun interjected.

Lea turned sideways in her chair to face Shaun. “Shaun. Listen. Glassy loves you, and he wants the best for you. He cares about you, and he’s worried that we’re taking a big step that could backfire and hurt you. And you know what that is? That’s what happens with parents when their children grow up and start making decisions of their own, decisions that the parents are afraid might be the wrong ones.”

“But… I’m not Dr. Glassman’s son.”

Lea’s mouth drew into a small smile. “Aren’t you, though?”

“N-no. You know who my father is. You’ve met him.”

“Yes, I have. But that’s not what I mean. When you think of the one person who was always there for you, like a father should be, the one person who loves and accepts you the way you are, who is there, no matter what, who is it that you’re thinking of?”

Shaun didn’t have to consider the answer very long. “Dr. Glassman.”

Aaron’s eyes were swimming with tears again, and he blinked several times, trying to swallow against the lump in his throat.

“Yes, exactly,” she said. “Have you honestly never thought about him being the father you were missing in your life?”

“I have,” Shaun said. “My biological father contributed half of my genetic makeup, but biology isn’t always important. Lots of children have stepfathers and adoptive parents that they consider their parents.” Shaun’s eyes flickered to meet Aaron’s for the briefest of seconds. “If you wanted to be my father, why did you never ask to adopt me?”

Yes, *why* had he never gone that route? Dammit, Shaun. He knew he had wanted to, but he had also *not* wanted to. It had been difficult and complicated, and after losing Maddie…

He looked down, averting his eyes. “I wasn’t sure you wanted that,” he said just above a whisper. But that wasn’t the whole truth now, was it? “Your relationship with your parents was so complicated, and I just… I don’t know. It just never seemed like the right time, you know?”

“Is it because you thought you weren’t a good father?”

Yes. Yes, it was. He had failed. And Shaun meant too much to him to also mess that up. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Because I wasn’t.”

“Maybe you weren’t with Maddie. But you always were with me.”

Now Lea was crying, and he was crying, and Shaun's eyes were on him, curious and warm and ever so deeply sincere and honest. Shaun looked from Aaron to Lea back to Aaron. "Why are you both crying?"

"Because you just said the most beautiful thing in the world, dummy," Lea smiled at him through her tears. "Now go and hug your real father. The one who's actually here."

Shaun blinked, then got up from his chair and walked over to where Aaron was sitting, looking at him expectantly. Aaron shook his head and got up, and then Shaun's arms were around him, tugging just the slightest bit, and more tears were running down Aaron's cheeks.

"Thank you," he said next to Shaun's ear, his voice thick. They stood for a few, long seconds. It wasn't the first time they'd hugged, but every time it felt more at home, and immense pride swelled up inside of him.

Shaun was the first to break the connection, and he took a step back. "Do you want me to call you 'Dad' now?"

Aaron chuckled. "No. You can call me anything you want."

Shaun pulled out a chair and sat down next to Aaron. "Is it… not strange to call your father 'Dr. Glassman'?"

Aaron sat back down as well. "Maybe, but does it matter?"

"I could call you Glassy."

Aaron's and Lea's eyes met, and both said in unison, "No."

"You can try calling me Aaron if you want. But Dr. Glassman will be just fine."

Shaun's mouth curved into a small smile. "Okay."

"So," Lea said, "now that that's out of the way, can we talk about the groomy fathery stuff?"

Aaron gave a small sigh. "You should know that I'm not particularly fond of the whole wedding rigamarole, but," he gestured to Lea and Shaun, "for the two of you, I will make a special exception."

Shaun leaned in to stage-whisper to Aaron. "I'm not sure I like it either, but Lea thinks it's very important. She has done a lot of reading, and she's asking me a lot of questions I don't know how to answer."

Aaron had to grin. "Let me guess. Flowers, guest lists, seating arrangements, wedding cake…"

"And attire. Do you think I should wear a tailcoat?"

"I think you would look very smart in a tailcoat. Do you want to wear a tailcoat?"

"I don't know. It seems very uneconomical not to wear the tuxedo I already own. It cost 2,368 dollars."

Aaron looked at Lea. "Do you want him to wear a tailcoat?"

“I would not say no to a tailcoat, but I think Shaun should wear what he wants.”

“He would come in slacks and a plaid shirt if you let him wear what he wanted.”

“No,” Shaun interjected, “that would not be appropriate attire for a wedding. Why is it important what I wear at the wedding?”

“Because you’re kind of the main event,” Aaron said. “Everyone will be looking at you, and you kinda want it to be special.”

Shaun let out a breath through pursed lips. “This is very complicated.”

Aaron met Lea’s gaze. “It doesn’t have to be.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Yes, apparently it does. My mother is already in full overbearing wedding planner mode. She keeps texting me all these Pinterest links and wedding blogs, and recommendations, and Shaun is zero help.” She briefly looked at him, “No offense, Shaun, I know you don’t care about this stuff, and that’s okay.” She looked back at Aaron. “Help me.”

Oh boy. He sighed. It was going to be a long night.