

Summary: Another surge of COVID cases hits California, and Shaun is stretched thinner than he'd care to admit. Lea can only stand by and watch, and it's not going well.
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Author's Note: Not my first fic, but first fic in this fandom. Fair warning: I haven't written anything in years, so my writing is probably rusty, and this one hasn't been beta'ed.
If you'd rather avoid any COVID-19 subject matter and would prefer reading COVID-free escapism fic, then I daresay this is not for you.
Timeframe: I imagine this taking place in season 4 – during the time of the untold COVID chronicles that they didn't really cover, probably somewhere in between episodes 4x02 and 4x03. I exercised a fair bit of creative license where a hypothetical future COVID situation is concerned.
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Another long night of what seemed like the longest year in history.

The apartment felt cold and lonely when Lea didn't have the distraction of work and when Shaun wasn't here. It was funny. She'd never really had much of a problem spending time by herself, but this whole last year and a half had done a number on all of them.

She let out a long breath through her nose and tried to focus her attention back on the cheesy

medical drama that she'd followed since season one.

"How about a rotationplasty? That way she would retain her range of movement in her knee joint."

"I think you may be on to something, Dr. Manning."

Usually, she enjoyed having time to herself to indulge in guilty pleasures of the televised kind. Medical shows were impossible to watch with Shaun. He'd interrupt every two minutes, launching into explanations as to why this or that was completely unrealistic, and how the surgical procedures were portrayed incorrectly.

She'd come to accept that medical shows were something she'd have to watch by herself.

"The nerve damage is considerable. It would be a very risky procedure."

She looked at her cell phone again. 12:33 am. No messages.

This wasn't unusual in itself. Shaun's communication frequency was random at best, and sometimes not hearing from him was a good thing—it meant he wasn't being plagued by puzzling emotional conundrums or a sudden crisis that needed solving.

She knew his shift should have ended at 10. She also knew COVID's aggressive zeta variant was wreaking havoc on San José's population, with the most recent spike in cases having pulled California into a state of emergency yet again. Hospitals were overflowing with patients and healthcare workers were working over capacity.

The last two weeks in particular had been tough for the frontline workers. Long days, few breaks, too much overtime, constant stress, constant vigilance, and more losses than she'd care to imagine. Shaun didn't always talk about it, and she knew not to probe too much.

Her thumbs hovered over the screen keyboard in the messaging app. Should she send him a message? Would that stress him even more? Or would it be a welcome distraction during trying times? What could she send that would even matter when he was trying to save so many lives threatened by this relentless virus?

The phone screen faded to black, and she put it down on the coffee table, barely paying attention to the TV show anymore. Something about compartment syndrome…?

The sudden noise from the door unlocking startled her. She turned her head to see his lanky figure enter, hanging his coat and backpack on the coat rack.

"Hey," she greeted him.

"Hello, Lea," he answered, and she could immediately tell that it hadn't been a good day.

She got up, trying to gauge how to approach him. With Shaun, it was often a bit of a dance to figure out what he needed.

What struck her more than ever, even in the muted light, were the bruises on his face. He had them most days now, from wearing the N95 mask and the surgical mask on top, from the glasses and sometimes the face shields. Today, they were raw and red and glaring. It was worse than she'd ever seen.

She couldn't help but whisper, "Shaun." She took a few, careful steps closer.

He went to the kitchen counter and got a glass out of the overhead cupboard to fill it from the tap. "I'm thirsty." His voice sounded robotic—more robotic than usual.

She tentatively edged closer. "Are you okay?"

That was a stupid question. Of course he wasn't okay.

"No," he simply said.

"Yeah, that was a stupid question. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

No, it really wasn't. "How can I help?"

He looked at her questioningly, and the bruises looked even more terrible and painful from up close. It took all her force of will not to pull him into a hug right here.

"Help with what?"

She sighed. "You look like you've had a terrible day. What can I do?"

"Hm." He shrugged. "Nothing."

It was painful to watch him wall himself off like this, and back was the knot in her stomach that was all too familiar these days. She reached out with one hand, carefully testing the waters, but he stiffened and took a step away from her. The knot instantly grew more intense.

"Are you hungry? Have you eaten?"

"No."

"No, you're not hungry, or no, you haven't eaten?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I could make some midnight snack pancakes…"

"I'm not hungry," he repeated.

"Okay." No, not okay. She would bet her pinky finger that he hadn't had a decent meal all day. She made a mental note to try and coax him into a heartier breakfast the next morning.

He was wringing his hands in front of him as he wordlessly walked to their bedroom, her eyes intent on him when he stopped in the middle of the living room and turned back to her. "You should leave."

Where was this coming from? "What do you mean, leave?"

"Infection rates have risen by 23% in the last two days. The majority of all cases are zeta variant

now. Your being around me puts you at significant risk, you should go back to live with your parents until incidence rates decrease."

She couldn't help but bristle. "Shaun, we talked about this. The hospital is doing everything they can to protect you. We're both vaccinated, and I know you're always careful."

"Vaccination provides a 96.5% protection against infection, 98% against hospitalization and death for the alpha and beta variants. It has a significantly lower efficacy with the zeta variant, although experts are still debating actual numbers. Current data suggests it could be as low as 40%."

"Unless I'm mistaken, current data also suggests that, if you get infected, vaccination lowers the chances of a severe course considerably. All things considered, it's a risk I'm willing to take. I'm not going to just up and leave because you think it might be unsafe."

He was clenching his jaw, readying for another attack. She could immediately tell that this was going to be one of those long and difficult arguments, the kind where he'd already made up his mind. "I don't think it *might* be unsafe. It *is* unsafe. Even less severe cases can result in long-term side effects or permanent disability. It is not a risk *I'm* willing to take."

"Oh, so *you* can just decide that *I* need to leave, and I need to bow to your infinite wisdom and just pack my things and go." She walked over to the bedroom, stopping in the door. "Sure. I'll go pack my things right now."

He stood like a statue, idly tracing her with his eyes but not meeting them. He wasn't good with sarcasm.

She sighed. "Look. I get it. You're worried. But so am I. About *you*. That's why I don't think it's a good idea to leave."

His right hand went into his hair to absent-mindedly tousle it—one of his self-reassurance gestures. He turned away from her. "You don't need to worry about me. I'm fine."

"Yeah, you're totally fine. Your face looks like the worst case of road rash I've ever seen. You only sleep five hours every night. You've lost, like, ten pounds in the last two weeks alone—and don't think I haven't noticed. We've barely spoken more than five sentences in the last three days.

"Shaun, you're burning the candle at both ends, and you can't keep going like this."

He stayed silent, seemingly studying the still running TV. He pointed a finger at the screen. "Their suturing technique is incorrect. You wouldn't use purse-string sutures—"

"Shaun!" she said, and it came out sharper than she intended.

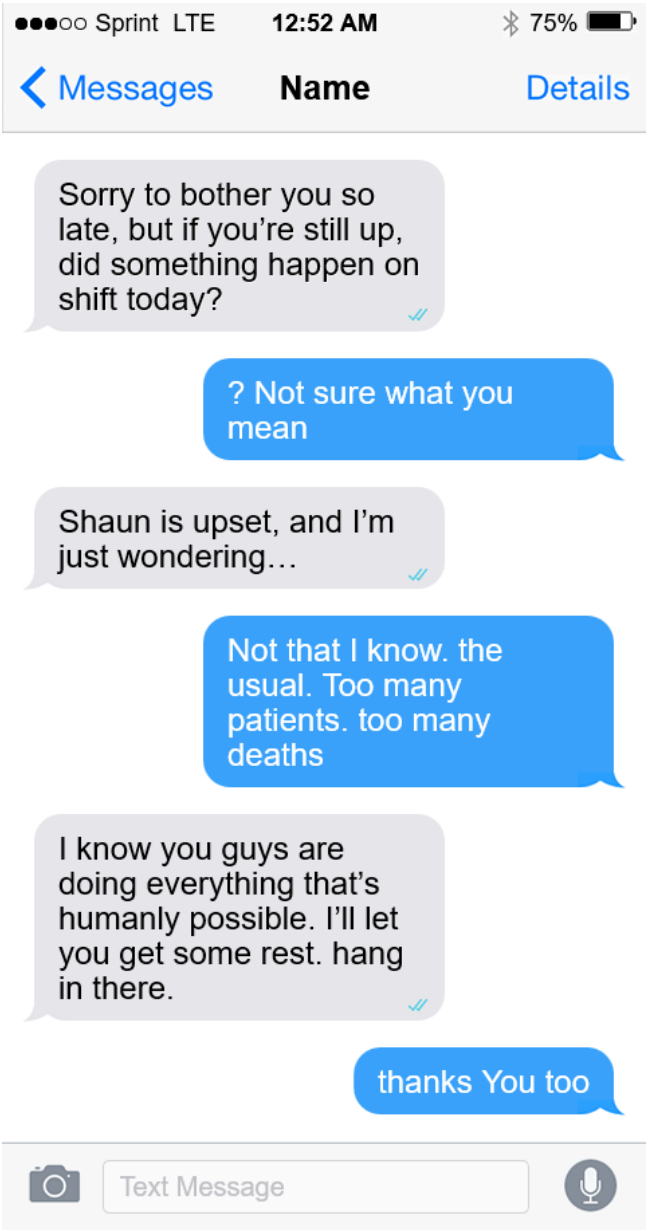
His eyes met hers for a split second, then he averted them again. "Please don't yell at me, Lea."

She immediately deflated. "You're right. I'm sorry." She went over to the sofa, took the remote control and switched off the television. Sitting down, she gave him the space to make the next move.

Lea had hoped he would sit down next to her, but instead he shuffled into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Gone was the usual spring from his step, these days he reminded her more of an old farmer after a long day in the fields.

With newfound resolve, she picked up her phone again. She tried to remember if he'd said who he had been working with today. She texted Park. *"Sorry to bother you so late, but if you're still up, did something happen on shift today?"*

She stared at the little checkmarks below the message, waiting for them to turn from grey to blue. It took too long, but after a few seconds, they did, and then the welcome *'Alex Park is typing…'*



Oh, Shaun. What was she supposed to do? Leave him alone? Gently push and hope he wouldn't snap?

The bedroom door opened, and he came out, dressed in his pajamas, making a beeline for the bathroom. She didn't stop him.

His phone alarms told her he was going through his routine. She tried to distract herself with scrolling through her Twitter timeline with little success. Her level of concern immediately shot up, when she heard a muffled, “No. No, no, no,” through the door.

She was by the door quickly and knocked. “Shaun? What’s wrong?”

The door opened in a swift motion, and it was all over his face that he was upset. He was holding the tube of toothpaste in one hand. “This is not the right toothpaste.”

“It’s Sensodyne Pronamel. Isn’t that the one you use?”

“I use Sensodyne Pronamel Repair Clean Mint, this is Pronamel Repair Extra Fresh.”

“That sounds really similar, I must have accidentally grabbed the wrong one.”

“Clean Mint has a blue label, Extra Fresh has a teal label.” He pointed to the tooth graphic on the tube. “This is teal, it should be blue. It is very easy to see. Please don’t buy Repair Extra Fresh.”

“Okay, now that I know, I won’t.”

“You already did.” He went back to the sink and pointed at the toothbrush holder with Lea’s name on it. “You didn’t put your toothbrush into the toothbrush holder.”

Geez, this again? “I must have forgotten this morning, I’m sorry.”

The toothpaste still in hand, he went into the kitchen. He picked up one of the apples from the fruit bowl in the corner. “You also bought Honeycrisp. I don’t like Honeycrisp, it’s too sweet and the pulp density is too low. I prefer Gra—”

“Granny Smith,” she interrupted, “I know.”

He put the toothpaste tube down on the counter, his voice now agitated. “Your dirty coffee mug was in the sink, and not in the dishwasher, like we agreed. You didn’t text me at lunch today. The cafeteria was out of Granny Smith too, and my cholecystectomy patient died on the table.”

She helplessly watched as he took a few steps back and retreated towards the patio, stopping in the doorframe. She slowly followed at a distance.

“We have 26 COVID patients that need to be in the ICU and not enough space to treat them all. There are four patients who need to be on a ventilator for whom we don’t have one.

“We had to take three patients off life support today, and two died during resuscitation. Nurse Brady had to go home with a fever, and I killed a patient.” He sat down in the left corner of the sofa, his back straight like a rod.

She frowned. “Wait, what?”

He didn’t answer, and she walked over, gingerly sitting down at the other end. He stared straight at the wall in front of him, his jaw set. Lea tried to make her voice as soothing as possible. “Surely, you didn’t kill anyone on purpose.”

He blinked, his voice devoid of emotion. “I made a mistake.”

“Okay, I can’t speak to what you might or might not have done, but you’re all overworked and at the limit. Maybe you should cut yourself some—”

“We can’t make mistakes. People die when we make mistakes.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“The patient came in with elevated temperature, chest pain and shortness of breath. We treated him for COVID, but he had a pulmonary embolism and died.”

“That sounds more like an unintentional misdiagnosis and not like it was necessarily your fault.”

“His temperature was only slightly elevated and he complained of anxiety and restlessness. His pulse was weak, and I should have done an MRI. I would have seen it in the imaging and we could have saved him.”

She let out a heavy breath. Shaun was a highly skilled diagnostician, it was something he prided himself on. A setback like this would hit him hard. “Did you talk to anyone about it?”

“Dr. Lim said it was a mistake anyone could have made, and we can’t always save everyone, especially under such high pressure conditions.” He blinked, staring emptily into the dark patio.

“And she’s probably right. I know you think it’s your fault, but you’re not superhuman, Shaun. All you can do is try the best that you can, and learn from past mistakes.”

He let out one of his non-committal *’hm’*s, and she wasn’t sure what that meant. Silence stretched on for a few, long seconds. The distress and inner turmoil were still clearly visible in every one of his features.

She wanted to comfort him, hold him, but Shaun was not like most people, who would unconditionally take solace in a touch or a hug, especially when he was upset or stressed. She scooted nearer, then moved to sit on the edge of the coffee table, giving him the opportunity to reach out without crowding his space. He didn’t move.

She flattened her palms against each other with her elbows on her knees, leaning forward. “Look, I know this is all really terrible. I can’t even imagine what you’re all going through.

“I admire you for it, for your dedication, and the sacrifices you make. But there comes a point where you have to put yourself first, where you need to take care of yourself to be able to keep helping others. It doesn’t help your patients if you run yourself into the ground.”

He put his hands flat on his thighs and started rubbing them up and down. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You can start by trying to get a little more sleep. Trying to take breaks to eat, trying to—”

“No,” he interrupted. “About the patients.”

“The patients?”

“Millions of people have been vaccinated, and it’s not helping. We have therapies, but they don’t always work, and the clinical trials for new ones aren’t fast enough. When I have a surgical

patient, I can help them by operating and fixing the problem. With COVID, I don't know how to fix it."

Oh. This was the big one.

"No one knows how to fix COVID, Shaun. I don't think you can put that on your shoulders."

He stayed quiet for a long moment, his eyes darting along the wall. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not."

He let out a long breath and his shoulders sagged. "I'm tired."

"I know." She reached out her hand, hoping he'd take it. "Let's go to bed."

He didn't, but he got up from the couch. She took a step closer but stopped at safe distance. "I really want to hug you."

He shook his head shakily, and she knew to back off. She vaguely pointed towards the bedroom. "Go ahead. I'll be with you in a moment. Or do you want me to sleep in the other room?"

"Hm. No."

"Okay."

She took her time to get ready for bed, hoping… what was she hoping? That he'd already be asleep? That he'd be more approachable? That she wasn't going to enter to a meltdown she didn't know how to deal with?

He was lying on his back on the bed, his eyes still open. She crawled under the covers next to him.

An awkward, silent minute stretched on, and she was racking her brain what to say, when he said her name.

"Lea?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what to do."

"I know. You're all about fixing things. But this isn't fixable. Not by you."

"I'm afraid," he said.

"Of what?"

"Of infecting you. And please don't say the risk is low because it's not."

She turned onto her side so that she could see him better. Even in the dim light from the bedside table lamp, he bruises on his face were still raw and glaring. "You remember what it was like in the spring? When we didn't see each other for weeks, and all we had was video calls and text messages?"

He nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“I hated it. I didn’t tell you how much I hated it, because I didn’t want it to be worse for you than it already was. I hated that I couldn’t be close to you, that you went through something and I couldn’t be there for you.

“I absolutely hate the thought of doing that again, but if you think it’s better that I go back to Hershey for a while, I will, if you promise to take care of yourself. I just wish there was another way, something else we could do.”

“I promise that I will take care of myself.”

Her voice quiet, she told him, “You need to get some rest. Let’s go to sleep.”

He let out another hum, and she turned to lie on her side with her back to him, hoping for sleep to come. It surprised her when she felt a soft touch on her shoulder.

He didn’t need to say anything. She gingerly turned around again and took his hand, running her thumb gently across the back of his hand. “You know I love you, right?”

His voice was already drifting off. “I love you, too,” he murmured. He fell asleep quickly after that.

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For the first time in days, the sky was devoid of clouds, bathing the patio in warm morning sunshine. Lea was sipping on her second mug of coffee with her laptop open in front of her when Shaun started stirring in the bedroom.

“Oh no,” she heard, then the door opened. His expression was disconcerted, his phone in his hand. “It is 9:13.”

He hurried into the room. “Why did my alarm not go off?”

“You slept through the first one, and then I switched it off.”

He glared at her as much as Shaun could ever muster something akin to a glare. “Why did you do that? I am going to be late.”

“Relax, Shaunie. I called the hospital. It’s fine.”

He briskly walked back into the bedroom, getting clothes out of the wardrobe. She followed after him. “Shaun, you don’t need to hurry. Andrews said you can take a couple of hours.”

He stopped mid-movement, looking at her. “You spoke to Dr. Andrews?”

“Yeah.” She squinted at him. “Are you mad?”

“Hm. No. Yes. Maybe a little.”

“If it’s any consolation, he was very sympathetic.”

He pulled a checkered button-down from the coat hanger. “I need to go.”

Lea went up to him and lightly touched his shoulder. “You can go after we’ve had breakfast. Remember what we talked about last night, about self-care?”

“I can eat at the hospital, and we don’t have Granny Smith.”

“Oh, but we do.” She gestured to the kitchen counter where a brown paper bag was still standing unpacked.

A small smile played across his face. “You bought apples.”

She smiled back at him. “I did. And not just that, I also got your minty toothpaste with the blue label. And I’ve had an idea. But go and do your thing first, I’ll make breakfast.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, and Lea started to make pancakes while she listened to his repeating phone alarms going off. Living with Shaun was an odd experience for sure, not something she’d ever in a million years imagined she’d be doing. And she’d have to lie if she said it wasn’t challenging. But what relationship wasn’t?

By the time a pile of fresh pancakes was waiting on the table, along with a glass of milk for him and orange juice for her, he came out of the bathroom, his hair neatly combed to one side. The bruises and red splotches on his cheeks betrayed his usually sweet and innocent look.

A brief moment of contented excitement flickered across his face when he sat down at the table. “Chocolate chip. My favorite.”

She held out the syrup to him. “So, about this idea I had…”

He briefly met her gaze, then turned his attention back to the pancakes. She went on. “You said you’re afraid to bring home COVID, so here’s what I’m thinking. I’ll set up a mattress in the spare room and I’ll sleep there. Whenever you’re here, we wouldn’t be in the same room, so that you wouldn’t have to be afraid that you’re giving me the virus.”

He pondered this for a long moment, and she could see that he was going back and forth on the pros and cons, trying to find flaws in her plan. It didn’t take long until he shook his head. “That wouldn’t work. We would still have to share the kitchen, and we only have one bathroom.”

“We can set up a ventilation schedule for the kitchen and the living room after you leave for your shift, and I’ll ask Marco if I can use his shower.”

“You… want to use the neighbor’s shower?”

She almost had to laugh at Shaun’s expression that hovered somewhere between surprise, worry and jealousy. “You know that he’s gay, right?”

“We don’t know where he goes and if he wears a mask. He could transmit the virus to you. It’d be much less safe than showering here. It wouldn’t work either.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“What if… Hm.” His eyes zoned out for a moment, then his face lit up. “I can shower at the hospital.”

She lifted her shoulders in a shrugging motion. “There, problem solved.”

“Not really. I still have to brush my teeth and use the toilet.”

“I can minimize my time in the bathroom and brush my teeth at the kitchen sink. I’ll put a mirror there, or something. I can wear an N95 mask when I use the toilet.”

He let out a non-committal hum, the kind that usually indicated he wasn’t happy with an answer or an idea. “You can’t shower with a mask.”

“True, but we can set up a ventilation schedule for the bathroom, too. It’s not like you’re leaving your saliva all over the place while you’re in there.”

“I can wear a mask in the bathroom while I’m not brushing my teeth.”

She cocked her head. “No. I wouldn’t ask you to wear a mask in your own home. Look what it’s already doing to you. That must hurt a lot.”

He gingerly touched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. “Not that much.”

“It looks really bad.” She got up from the table and took a plastic tub and a glass bottle out of the paper bag on the kitchen counter. “Speaking of which…” She placed both items on the table in front of Shaun.

He picked up the tub. “Diaper rash cream?”

“I did a little research. They recommend applying zinc oxide to help with the maskne.”

He frowned in confusion, and she explained. “Maskne. That’s what they call the,” she pointed to his face, “facial rash from the medical masks.”

“You also bought vinegar.”

“It’s for a vinegar soak. You mix it with warm water, soak a washcloth in it and lay it across the affected areas for 15 minutes.”

She could see him visibly shudder and added, “I know. There’s your aversion to washcloths. And the vinegar will probably smell. We don’t have to do it. I just thought it might help. Maybe you wanna try before you say no?”

He seemed to be considering it for a long while. “Okay,” he finally said.

“You wanna try it now?”

“Hm. No. I don’t have time.”

“All right. Maybe tonight I can help you with it.”

He shook his head. “N-no. We won’t be in the same room anymore.”

“Well, yeah, okay, then you can try it while I add unqualified commentary from afar through the patio window.”

He made a face. “I won’t like that.”

She chuckled. “Too bad, but I’m afraid it’s something you’ll have to put up with.”

He stuffed the last bite of pancake into his mouth. “I have to go.” He was already getting up, carrying his plate, when he stopped and turned around. “These were very good. Thank you.”

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. “Why, thank you.”

He pondered something for a short moment. “You are right, I have lost weight. I will exercise self-care. They have pancakes in the cafeteria, although they are not as good as yours.”

“How does salmon and spinach casserole sound for tonight?”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“That’s not exactly an overwhelmingly enthusiastic endorsement. Is there something else you’d rather eat?”

He walked to the sink with his dishes while he spoke, “Why do I have to overwhelmingly endorse your choices for dinner?”

“You don’t. But I wanna cook something nice that you’ll like.”

“I will like salmon and spinach casserole. Unless you put pickles in it.”

She let out a short laugh. “Yes, Shaun, all your meals will have pickles in them, because I know how much you love pickles.”

“You… are being sarcastic.”

“Look at you. You’re getting so much better with sarcasm.”

He made a face. “It‘s hard. But I *am* getting better at it. I will leave now.”

She got up. “Wait. Can I get one last hug before we don’t touch each other for weeks to come?”

His face well, as if she’d just reminded him of needing to get a tooth pulled. “Okay,” he just said and stood where he was, his arms hanging by his sides.

He felt too bony in her arms when she reached around him. His arms softly came around her back, and they stood for a long moment—longer than he’d usually hold her in an embrace. That told her it was hard on him, too.

She let him pull away when he was ready, and couldn’t help but notice the small smile on his face. “Okay. I have to go now.”

“Go. Save lives, Dr. Shaun Murphy.”

He was out the door before she could say anything else.

She cleared the table and started washing up, pondering how best to execute their social

distancing apartment segregation plan.

The longest year in history was not quite over yet.