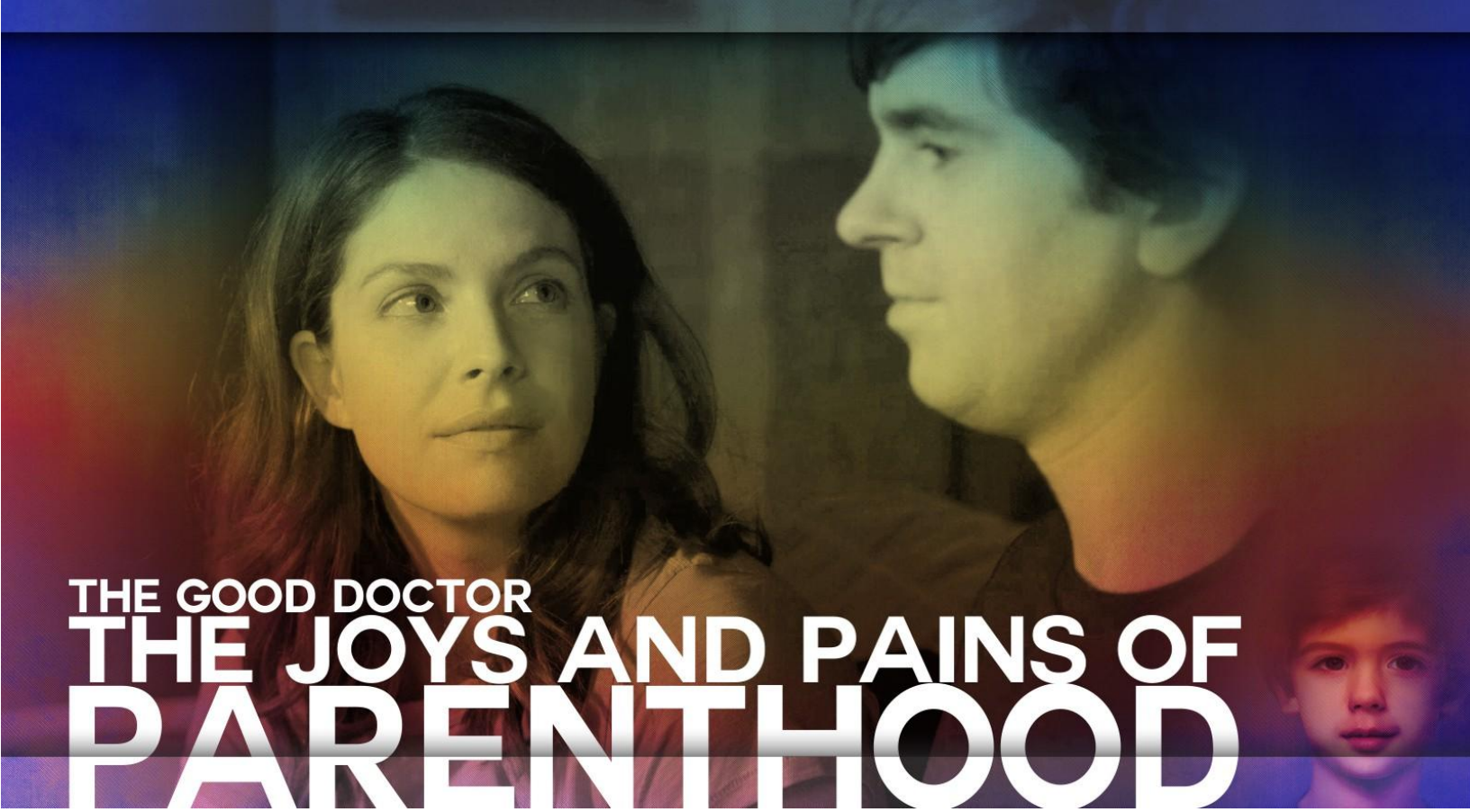


Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Author's Note:
I had originally planned to post this fic in the week *"Boys Don't Cry"* aired, oblivious to fact that Shaun and Lea were heading for this brick wall of having trouble to conceive. After seeing the episode, I decided that I would postpone publicly publishing the story since timing was just incredibly awkward, and it would have been ill-advised to post this when the fandom was mourning the destruction of the happy Shea family dream.

A small audience of fans has indicated you'd still like to read the story, so I'm putting it now up in a limited capacity for you all to enjoy. Since the show is about hope, and since Shaun always tries to see the positive in life, perhaps this can be a beacon of hope for Shaun and Lea's journey and their dream of having a child one day. Let's imagine Lea will have the hysteroscopy and things will work out and the two of them have a healthy baby boy, whenever it happens.

Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

Timeframe:
This story is an introduction to my Finnianthology – a series of fics that features Shaun and Lea's child, who in my alternate universe is a sweet little boy named Finnian (Finn for short). I imagine Finn would be born probably either during the s6/s7 transition break or in early season 7, although of course now it's written in the stars as to whether we will ever see Shaun and Lea become biological parents. (I have no doubts, however, that they'll become parents in one way or another - adoption is always an option and would be an awesome way for Shaun to pay it forward.) Big thanks to Twitter user Danielle who inspired the name Finnian.

The Finnianthology is rooted in canon but going to be AU-ish for season 6. It's set in the same universe as my other story "Bent, Not Broken". If you haven't read that one, over the course of Shaun's recovery from a shoulder injury, Shaun and Lea become good friends with the owners of

a horse sanctuary outside of the city. The horse farm owners are old friends of Glassman's – Ira and his wife Tammy, who also have a daughter (Jennifer) and two grandkids (Parker and Theo). You may see some of these characters pop up here and there in my Finnianthology.

This story pretty much ignores what is currently happening in season 6, particularly with regard to the Shaun/Lim controversy, so it will take into account what happened up to episode 5x18 *"Sons"* but may not be fully compatible with what has and will still happen after that. It will, however, build on the general s6 setting, including Danni and Danny as new residents.

Author's Note PS:
I've had two people requesting that I write Lea sickfic, which I guess this might cover a little bit. Probably not exactly what you had in mind, but I hope it scratches that itch to a degree. 😊 But if you were hoping for Shaun being a super cutesie and supportive caretaker, I think we all know that's not exactly his forte…

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The Joys and Pains of Parenthood

It's the middle of the night—Lea's phone tells her it's 4:08 am—when she hears Shaun rush to the bathroom for the first time. It doesn't sound good, he's definitely upchucking into the toilet bowl.

Trying to decide whether to go check on him, she waits. What can she do? It must be whatever Finn was sick with the last few days. A puking toddler sure wasn't fun to deal with, but he bounced back quickly, reassuring both of them that it was just a regular kid illness interlude they'd be seeing many more of in the years to come.

It takes a while for Shaun to come crawling back into bed. She turns to face him. "You caught whatever Finn had, huh?"

"Yes," he grumbles into the pillow.

"Anything I can do?"

"No. I want to sleep now."

Okay, message received. Lea turns to lie on her back, hoping for a small miracle that it was just a single occurrence and Shaun has expelled whatever wasn't sitting right with him.

Maybe an hour later, she realizes it very much wasn't a single occurrence. Shaun is retching into the toilet again, and she notices with a feeling of dread that she is also feeling a little nauseous. She wants to chalk it up to vicarious sympathy response, but just when she hears Shaun roll open the bathroom door, she becomes acutely aware that whatever is now rebelling in her stomach wants out.

She almost collides with him outside the bedroom door and bolts for the bathroom. It's not pretty and she hates every second of it as she rides it out. She waits a moment, then flushes the toilet when her stomach finally settles enough to let her get up, hoping that the commotion didn't wake their two-year-old toddler next door.

Not bothering to close the bathroom door, Lea tries to be as quiet as she can when she drags herself to the storeroom off the kitchen to get out the plastic bucket they keep there. She also has the frame of mind to get the plastic bowl out of the bottom cabinet that has been labeled the 'puke bowl'.

Thankfully, Finn still seems to be fast asleep as she tiptoes back to the bedroom, already feeling weak and drained.

She wordlessly puts the puke bowl on Shaun's nightstand, the bucket on the floor on her side of the bed, and crawls back under the covers, a shiver washing over her. She hopes it's not a harbinger of another bout of nausea quite so soon.

Shaun stirs next to her, and his voice is small and tired. "Are you sick?"

She wants to sigh, can't quite hold back the snark. "No, I'm puking just so you don't feel so alone in your misery."

"Why?"

Geez, Shaun, really? She lets out an actual sigh. "Sarcasm, Shaun. Yes, I'm sick."

"That's not good."

No. No, it really isn't. She knows it'll only get worse when Finn wakes up, because now they're both nauseous and miserable, and Finn will want attention and food and, oh, a new diaper. The thought alone makes her queasy.

Shaun lets out a little moan next to her, and she can definitely empathize. The stomach cramps are the worst, and she knows there's very little either of them can do about it other than try to ride it out and get through it.

She turns to lie on her side with her back to Shaun, curling up her legs. She knows it's an illusion, but maybe she can catch a little more sleep before their son wakes up.

Lea isn't sure if she's actually managed to drift back off to sleep or not, but she's rudely awoken by Shaun retching into the plastic bowl next to her. Looks like he didn't make it to the bathroom this time. Her own stomach turns and she manages to swallow whatever is rebelling there back down.

And there's now also the familiar crying of their son clamoring for attention in his bed in the nursery. With Shaun clearly down and out, Lea knows she'll have to go, even though she now definitely feels feverish, and she thinks it won't be too long before she'll need the toilet again herself. So much for their laid back family Sunday.

She inhales, tries to muster the energy, knows she doesn't have it, but gets up anyway. Shaun is hunched over on his side of the bed, but she knows she can't help him right now, so she shuffles into the nursery.

Finn is standing in his bed, down to his little grousing cries that are ebbing off already, now that mommy is here.

Lea picks him up and sets him down on the floor, resists the urge to just sink to her knees and rest there for a moment, wishing for a miracle to make this go away. Finn is pulling on her pajama pants. “Mommy.”

She puts a hand on his head, knows her voice sounds tired. “Finn, Mommy and Daddy are sick.”

“Sick?” he asks.

She knows he’s too young to understand the concept, knows he won’t know to leave them alone and be a little less high maintenance for the day. Just perfectly timed, her stomach lurches with another cramp, and she knows she has to hurry to the bathroom.

Wordlessly, she leaves her son where he is, because what else can she do, and makes a run for it.

She feels a little better when the remaining food in her stomach has been expelled, not knowing what to do with the fact that Finn is edging carefully closer through the open door, probably lured by the unfamiliar noises.

She leans back on her heels, tries to pull herself together, wipes her mouth with a piece of toilet paper. Finn gets close and squeezes into her side. “Mommy?”

She closes her eyes. “Yeah. Mommy is sick. Like you were the last few days.”

“Mommy sick,” he repeats, one of his little hands planted on her back.

She gently brushes his brown hair away from his forehead. “Yeah. You know what, I think we need to call your grandpa.”

“Rampa,” Finn blindly repeats.

“You wanna spend time with Grandpa today?”

“Yes,” he said, still a bit hesitant, but sounding a bit more upbeat.

Lea tries to gather the resolve to get through at least the essential parts of their morning routine. There’s a need for a diaper change. Finn will need to eat something, but maybe that can wait for a bit. Or maybe she just needs to find something low effort.

Changing Finn’s diaper is taking longer than it usually does, her fingers are clumsy and everything takes twice as much effort, but finally she’s ready to set him down on the floor of the bathroom again.

She knows her energy is dwindling quickly, wishes Shaun could come and help, but he won’t unless she explicitly asks. In the kitchen, she opens the fridge, then closes it again. At the thought of messy-feeding her child anything right now, her stomach churns again. That won’t work unless she can get Shaun to do it.

Resigning to her fate for now, she takes the package of animal crackers and a banana and takes Finn’s hand outside the bathroom where he’s been lingering with his thumb in his mouth. “Come on.”

He dutifully follows her to the bedroom on his little legs and she tries to gauge what Shaun is up to. He's lying on his back, his eyes closed, the bowl on the floor and it's kinda gross. Finn can't help but notice and points at it. "Daddy sick."

"Yes," Lea sighs. "We're both sick, and that's really not great."

"Not great," Finn repeats after her.

"No," she says. "That's Daddy's puke, please don't touch that."

Lea bends down and gently touches Shaun's thigh. "Shaun?"

He lets out a sound that's halfway between a hum and a moan.

"Can you watch Finn for a moment?"

He makes the same sound again and doesn't move. Men. Always so melodramatic. She nudges him again with a little more urgency. "Shaun, please. I'm also miserable, I think I'm running a fever, but our son needs to eat something."

Without further ado, she picks Finn up and sits him down in the middle of the bed, puts the banana and the crackers on Shaun's nightstand, then picks up the puke bowl, trying to keep her nose away from it. "Ugh, this is gross, but I'll take care of this for you."

That makes him stir and give her a low, "I'll do it."

"Are you sure?"

He says yes, but it's more like a sigh. She knows the feeling.

Like the picture of misery, Shaun takes the bowl and shuffles out of the bedroom. Lea calls after him, "Can you bring some oat milk for Finn?" She isn't sure it has registered, but Shaun usually doesn't miss a beat.

Lea gets back into her bed and starts peeling the banana to break it into smaller pieces, one of which she hands to Finn who happily stuffs it into his mouth. She's just opening the crackers when Shaun comes back, giving her a disdainful look, which still works despite the fact that he looks pretty miserable.

"That is not a healthy choice for breakfast."

She sighs. "Yeah, I know. Do you wanna make him something better?"

Shaun hands her Finn's drinking bottle that has the oat milk in it, then sits down with sagged shoulders. "No. I am nauseous."

"Yeah, Shaun, it's not just you. Our son won't wither on the vine if we feed him unhealthy crackers for breakfast one morning, okay?"

Shaun lies back down and pulls the blanket over him, drawing his knees up. Lea wants to do the same, but Finn is holding out his already grubby banana hand. "Mommy, more."

She gives him another piece, then nudges Shaun. “Can you help? He needs his milk.”

Shaun just mumbles. “I am very nauseous.”

Lea can feel some resentment welling up inside her over Shaun ostensibly now playing the pity card. She reaches over and huffily grabs the bottle from the nightstand and hands it to her son, who immediately drinks from it, letting the half-eaten piece of banana fall onto their bed covers. She sighs. They’ll have to clean that up later.

She takes three of the crackers out of the package and puts them in Finn’s lap. “One by one, okay? Not all at the same time.”

Her phone is on her nightstand and she’s just picked it up when another stomach cramp hits that she rides out, then makes the effort to pull up Glassy’s number. It’s ten to seven, she hopes it’s not too early to call.

He takes a while to answer, his voice sounds sluggish. “Lea?”

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry. Shaun and I are both sick, we’ve been puking half the night. I think we need some help with Finn.”

He sounds a bit more alert now. “Do you want me to come?”

“Would you?”

As if on cue, Finn comes crawling over, loudly proclaiming, “Rampa?”

Lea ignores it, but Finn assertively adds, “Mommy Daddy sick.”

She can’t help but smile. “There you have it from the expert.” There’s another stomach cramp and she lets out a moan. “Sorry, gotta go. Please come.”

She throws the phone on the pillow as she shoots out of bed, doesn’t want to puke into the bucket with Finn right there, and only just makes it to the bathroom for another round, wishing for the world to end or maybe just for this to stop. Being sick is bad enough, but double whammy with both her and Shaun down and out, an energetic, eager toddler to contend with is just not something she thinks they’re equipped to deal with today.

When she gets back to the bedroom, Finn is holding her phone to his ear, babbling something unintelligible. At least Shaun is now turned on his side to watch him. She sits down and looks at Finn. “Are you still talking to Grandpa?”

Finn nods enthusiastically. “Yes.”

She holds out her hand and Finn gives her the phone. There’s a bit of softened cracker mush on it which she tries to ignore. “Aaron?” she asks.

His voice sounds like he's put the phone on speaker. "Yeah, I'm getting ready. I'll be there in half an hour, maybe."

"Thank you."

"Sure. I'll see you soon."

"Okay. Bye."

She looks at Shaun. "Glassy will be here in half an hour, he says."

"Good," Shaun just comments.

Finn keeps munching away on the crackers and the banana in the middle of their bed, making it through half of both before he crawls off the bed and leaves the room.

She calls after him. "Finnie? Finn?"

"Yes, Mommy," he calls back, coming to the door.

Lea tries to decide if she needs to get up, but she doesn't think she can engage in play time right now. "Why don't you go to your room and play for a little bit?" she encourages him.

Their apartment is pretty much child-proof by now, and he knows how to occupy himself for a while if he gets properly engrossed in something.

"Okay," he says, and she decides she's just going to hope for the best and closes her eyes, lets the exhaustion wash over her as a headache is starting to pound all over her frontal lobe.

She isn't sure how long it's been when she wakes up again from her fever now making itself known with a spell of the shivers. Finn is nowhere to be seen, and it's eerily quiet.

She turns slightly to her side, reaches out a hand to poke Shaun through the covers. "Shaun? Can you check on Finn?"

He lets out a malcontent hum and doesn't move, which isn't surprising. She nudges a little more forcefully. "Shaun. Come on, I changed his diaper and gave him breakfast. Please check what he's doing."

Shaun reluctantly gets out of bed with disheveled hair, comes back on his own a minute later to go back to bed.

"Shaun?"

"He is occupied."

"With what?"

"He is drawing on the wall with crayon."

Lea is suddenly more awake. "What?"

Shaun repeats tiredly, “He is drawing with crayon.”

“On the wall?”

“Yes.”

“Shaun!”

“It will come off.”

“Not very easily.”

“He looked very happy.”

She sighs. “Yeah, he would be. We really should stop him before he does more damage.”

Shaun ignores the comment, and Lea thinks she may want to ignore it for the moment, too. Another thing they can take care of later. Why is Glassy not here yet?

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Aaron isn’t quite sure what to expect as he nears the door to Shaun and Lea’s apartment, but he knows enough to imagine. He’s well aware what Shaun gets like when he’s sick, he’s a bit of a taciturn drama queen. Lea’s probably a tough cookie, but being sick is never fun for anyone.

He knocks on the wooden door, waits a moment, then lets himself in. There’s a disheveled Lea coming to meet him, she does indeed look pretty miserable, wrapped in what he thinks is a hastily thrown on dressing gown over her pajamas.

“Thank God you’re here,” she says with clear and audible relief in her voice.

“What can I do?” he asks immediately.

“As much as I love our son, please take him off our hands.”

Aaron lets out a little chuckle. “That I can do. Where is he?”

Lea wordlessly points at the nursery door before she walks back to the bedroom. Aaron goes to check on his grandson, and the picture that presents itself has him emit an involuntary laugh. “Oh my,” he states, then immediately goes into damage control mode.

Little Finn is still drawing uncoordinated circles on the wall that is already well adorned with scribbles, lines and shapes in dark purple crayon, happily exclaiming, “Rampa!”

“Finnie, good Lord,” he tells the boy, who joyfully comes to meet his grandfather’s open arms.

Aaron picks him up to take care of the most immediate mess. Purple Crayola is all over his hands, some even made it up his forearm and the corners of his mouth. Aaron hopes he didn’t actually eat the thing.

Finn enthusiastically points at the wall. “Look, Rampa.”

“Yes, that’s very creative, but we need to get you cleaned up,” he says, prying the crayon from Finn’s hand as he takes the boy to the bathroom.

It takes a bit of work to wash the wax pen residue off the child’s skin, but Finn thankfully isn’t immediately averse to the idea, especially since Aaron lets him play with the liquid soap dispenser that he seems to love. Aaron is just finishing it up with a damp washcloth when Shaun rushes into the bathroom and makes it straight to the toilet to retch into it.

Aaron raises his eyebrows as Finn comments, “Daddy sick.”

“Yes, he is.”

“Rampa help.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna do my best.”

Between dry-heaves, Shaun supplies, “You can’t help.”

“I beg to differ,” he tells Shaun, then picks up Finn again to check in on the state of the bedroom and figure out what the best course of action is.

Lea is in bed on her back with her eyes closed, Aaron sees the half-eaten banana on Shaun’s bedside table that has started to go brown at the edges. There’s also an open package of animal crackers and a carelessly discarded but now empty bottle of milk in the middle of the bed. He can guess what that means.

He picks up the remnants of the food to take them to the kitchen, then gets a cloth to clean away the biggest mess on the covers while Finn starts opening the middle dresser drawer to pull out Shaun’s socks. Aaron figures it’s a harmless enough activity to let him engage in for the moment.

He addresses Lea. “What do you need me to do? Diaper? Food? Is he still hungry?”

“I changed his diaper. Maybe try more food, he had milk and half the banana and some crackers,” she says tiredly.

Aaron puts the six sets of socks Finn has pulled out back into the drawer, then picks him up again. “Are you still hungry, Finnie?”

“Yoyo,” Finn proclaims.

“Yoyo?” He looks at Finn. “What kind of answer is that?”

“He wants yogurt,” Lea explains.

“Okay, let’s see what we can do.”

“We’re out. We were going to get groceries today. Guess that’s not happening.”

“Oh dear, what can we do about that? Come on, let’s go look what we have to work with, shall we?”

“Don’t give him any dairy,” Lea reminds him of the dietary requirement Aaron is already well aware of.

He takes Finn to the kitchen and checks the supplies. There’s two cups of yogurt in the fridge but when Aaron checks the labels, they are both dairy-based. Probably for Shaun’s cereal breakfast. He lifts the package of oat milk, there’s still a good amount left in it.

He addresses Finn again. “How do you feel about porridge?”

“Porry!” Finn says enthusiastically.

“Okay, porridge it is.”

Aaron brings the high chair over to the kitchen counter and puts Finn on it, gives him a few kitchen utensils and the package of the oats to play with while he starts preparing everything. A tired and disheveled looking Shaun comes to check out what’s going on after a few minutes.

Aaron turns to him. “Stomach flu got you good, huh?”

He makes a face. “Yes. I don’t feel very well.”

“Yeah, I bet. Why don’t you go back to bed, I’ve got this.”

Shaun eyes the counter. “Don’t feed him dairy products.”

“Yes, I know.” He lifts the oat milk package. “It’s not the first time I’m spending time with your son, you know?”

“He is very allergic,” Shaun adds as if he needs to drive the point home.

“Yes, I know that, too.”

“Do not put sugar in the porridge.”

Aaron audibly inhales. “Shaun, can you please go back to bed?”

Shaun just lets out a hum, lingers for a moment, then does as he is instructed. Aaron shakes his head as he watches Shaun slowly make his way back to the bedroom.

The porridge is prepared quickly and Aaron makes sure that it has the right temperature before he relocates Finn and the high chair to the table to serve it to Finn. He puts a little bit of syrup on it, lifting an index finger to his mouth, whispering conspiratorially to Finn, “Don’t tell your dad, okay?”

Finn nods and says, “Okay.” Aaron isn’t sure he really knows what he’s agreeing to, but smiles approvingly at his grandson anyway.

Of course Finn eats all of three spoons from the porridge before he starts getting restless and impatient. He points at the bowl with the porridge in front of him and says, “More,” but when Aaron tries with another spoonful, he keeps his mouth closed and just dunks his finger in the syrup and then licks it. “More this.”

A-ha. The boy is way too clever for his own good. Aaron acquiesces and gives him another spoon that has ample syrup with the porridge, which Finn is happy about, but it's pretty clear he isn't really hungry anymore.

"Okay, I think you've had enough." Aaron lifts him out of the chair and lets him roam free for a moment, then puts him to the task to play with his Duplo bricks and build him a tower, which Finn seems to be happy to engage in.

Aaron wonders what he can do for the other two problem children under his wing. He knows there is very little medically that can be done, but he had remembered to make a stop on the way to bring a stomach flu essential.

He gets two glasses from the kitchen cabinet and takes them to the bedroom, together with the two bottles of Gatorade from his canvas bag.

Both Shaun and Lea are lying with their eyes closed, probably hoping for quick relief that they won't quite find yet. He sits down on Shaun's side of the bed, puts the glass and the bottle with the blue colored drink on his nightstand while Shaun wearily watches him.

"Arctic Freeze for you, cause I know you actually like that flavor." He pours Shaun half a glass.

Then he turns his attention to Lea as he walks over to her side, holding up an orange colored bottle. "Wasn't sure which flavor you prefer, but Orange is usually a pretty safe option. Try to drink some of it. Small sips, not too much at once, helps it stay down a little better. I can also get you some water if you prefer."

She gives him a grateful look. "Thanks, this is fine."

He pats her thigh. "Sure. Anything else I can get you?"

Lea shakes her head.

Aaron heads to the bathroom next, checking on Finn on the way, who is sitting on the floor, stacking his plastic bricks. After a bit of roaming around in the cabinet drawers, he finds the forehead thermometer that he takes back to the bedroom.

He gently touches Shaun, shows him the device so that he isn't startled. The display tells him what he thought. "You've got a bit of a temperature."

Shaun just hums, doesn't even ask how high it is. Aaron thinks he's pretty out of it. The Gatorade hasn't been touched.

He goes to check Lea next, her temperature is higher. "You're running a fever, young lady."

"Yeah, feels like it, too."

"It's not that high, but you should probably try some acetaminophen."

"Won't help if it doesn't stay down," she mumbles.

"Yeah, I know. Don't you have a liquid suspension for Finn?"

It's Shaun who answers, "We do."

"Where?"

"Top shelf, kitchen cabinet above the sink."

Aaron finds it quickly, gets a spoon and puts both on Lea's bedside table. "Just try it when you can, okay?"

She nods again. "Thanks."

"All right. Well, I'm gonna go and pack up some things for Finn and then we'll be out of your hair so you can get some rest, okay?" As if on cue, Finn comes into the bedroom, balancing a sizable tower of Duplo bricks in his hands.

"Rampa, look," he proudly says.

Aaron rescues it before it can topple over. "That's quite a tower, Finn. Good job on that one."

"It is very big."

"That, it is," Aaron confirms.

Finn walks over to where Shaun is lying in bed, poking him a little. "Daddy."

Shaun just lets out a tired hum and Aaron says, "Finn, your mom and dad aren't feeling very well. We should let them sleep a little. What do you say you come with me today and we'll do some fun things together? You can sleep at my house tonight, too."

Finn's face lights up. "I want to sleep with Rampa."

"Okay, that's clear endorsement. Let me pack a few things we'll need and then we can leave, okay?"

Finn nudges Shaun again. "Daddy?"

"No, Daddy can't come," Aaron says. "He's sick, remember? He needs to rest so he can get better."

Shaun lets out a sound that's halfway between a hum and a moan. "Please take him away, he has a full diaper."

Aaron has to hide a smile. "Oh dear, we can't have that, can we?"

He takes Finn's hand. "Come on, little pooper, let's take care of you."

Shaun mumbles, "Don't call him a pooper," but Aaron ignores it.

One diaper change later and the duffle bag filled with clothes and other toddler necessities, Aaron checks in again one last time with Shaun and Lea, telling them he's leaving now and to text or call if they needed anything. Both sound weary and sick and tired, he hopes they can get some sleep and get over the worst quickly.

With a content and expectant Finn walking next to him, holding his hand, he's pondering a visit to the horse farm for a change of scenery, knowing that Finn always loves it there, and knowing that Ira and Tammy also love having the little boy around. Maybe that's going to be their plan for the day.

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Shaun feels a certain amount of relief when the apartment door clicks into its lock and there's finally silence. Of course he loves his son, but he feels pretty terrible. His head is pounding, his stomach feels like it's been scraped empty with a serrated spoon and he hates the acidic aftertaste that seems to linger all the way down his throat.

Lea stirs next to him, turns to her side to face him, draws the covers closer around her. "I feel pretty miserable," she says. "How about you?"

Shaun doesn't really want to talk. Everything seems to take extra effort.

She adds, "Maybe we should try to sleep a little?"

Sleep sounds good. Shaun hopes it's gonna be uninterrupted. He just wants this to be over.

He turns to lie on his side with back to Lea and closes his eyes, wishing to fall asleep and wake up in peak health.

When Shaun awakens, he feels disoriented and strange. Lea is shooting past the bed and out of the bedroom on bare feet. He blinks, still feeling sluggish but definitely better than before. A quick glance at his watch tells him he slept over three hours.

With a grunt, he pushes himself up into a seating position. The headache is still there, but it's lessened considerably. He eyes the Gatorade on his nightstand, actually feels a little thirsty. His throat is dry and raw, but he takes a small sip, then a bigger one. That feels good. He takes a third sip before he puts the drink away. He'll have to remember to drink more if this works in his favor—dehydration and all that.

He ponders what to do. Lie down again? Sleep more? Maybe he can get up and watch some TV, he doesn't feel tired, tests the waters by dangling his feet over the side of the bed. The Gatorade also seems to be fairly agreeable to his battered stomach, so he takes another two sips before he gets up, puts on his bathrobe and settles on the couch.

The Weather Channel gives him the forecast for the Bay Area, it's a mild spring day with a mix of clouds and sunshine, temperatures up into the mid-70's. He listens to the audio for a bit, then hears the toilet flushing, the faucet, and eventually the door rolling open and closed again.

Lea comes shuffling over to the couch and sits down, drawing her knees up. He looks at her, notices that her hair is all over the place, her cheeks flushed against skin that's paler than usual. All signs that she's still running a fever. She tells him, "Better not go into the bathroom for a while, it's graduated to my gut."

"Have you been vomiting?"

"Just now? No. God, both at the same time would suck so much more."

“Yes, it would.”

She shivers a little, and Shaun pulls the blanket from where it’s folded over the back of the couch next to him, hands it to her. “We need to take your temperature.”

She wraps the blanket around her shoulder and huddles into it. “Are you feeling better?” she asks.

“Yes. But you are not.”

“Not really, no.”

“Did you drink the Gatorade?”

She sighs. “No. God, please don’t make me eat or drink anything right now.”

“You will be at risk of dehydration. You have not ingested any fluids today at all.”

Lea draws a face he knows is not a happy one. “Shaun, if all you’re gonna do is lecture me right now, I’m going back to bed.”

“I am worried. You need to drink.”

“Yeah, I know. But I just feel really crappy right now, and I don’t think my insides are ready for that yet.”

“What are your symptoms?”

“You mean beside the bowel cramps, the diarrhea, the chills, the fever and the skull-splitting headache?”

“Yes.”

“I think that about covers it,” she says with a sigh.

“It is most likely a viral infection with a norovirus or a rotavirus.”

“I don’t care what it is, I just want it to be over.”

“It’s very probable that we contracted it from Finn when he was vomiting two days ago.”

“Yeah, thank you, Dr. Obvious.”

“Please keep an eye on your stool. If it becomes bloody, black or tarry, you need to go to the hospital.”

He can hear Lea sigh again. “Shaun, I feel really crappy and I don’t need you to play doctor right now, okay? Can you please be a little less preachy and a bit more supportive?”

Ah geez, he’s doing this all wrong, isn’t he? “Supportive, how?”

“Just… switch off the doctor mode and, I don’t know… be here.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I *am* here.”

“Yeah, I know. Just don’t try to push anything on me or ask a million questions.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone? I could leave, but then I *wouldn’t* be here.”

“No, I don’t want you to leave. Listen, I’m going back to bed, okay?”

He looks at her, tries to gauge if he offended her. “I want to be supportive, but I think I did it wrong. What do you need me to do?”

She gets up from the couch. “Nothing. I’ll tell you if I need anything. In the meantime, just let me get some more rest. If you wanna sleep some more in the bed, that’s fine. I think I just need to sleep this off.”

“Yes, sleep will most likely help. And the acetaminophen Dr. Glassman gave you if you can tolerate it, as well as the electrolytes in the Gatorade. I will be here if you need me.”

She takes the Pendleton blanket with her as she goes back into the bedroom with a, “Thank you.”

He watches her warily, stares at the closed door after she’s shut it. There’s something welling up inside of him that takes a moment to surface. He thinks it’s concern and unease, maybe also guilt and discontent that he couldn’t read what Lea needed, that she wanted support he didn’t give her.

He’s never been good at the non-verbal cues, knows he never will be good at them. What was she communicating that he missed alongside the actual words? Did she want physical contact? He knows he’s also not good at initiating that, they’ve talked about it before, but it’s hard for him to tell when that’s appropriate outside their normal routines and established patterns.

His phone vibrates on the table, startling him. It’s a message from Dr. Glassman. A somewhat blurry photo of Finn standing at the fence of the very familiar horse paddocks, reaching a hand out towards Pickles’ bent down head.

Shaun smiles briefly. Finn is definitely in good hands. The accompanying text reads, ‘Decided to take a little trip. Tammy says hi. How’s the morphine sickbay?’

Shaun frowns. That must be an autocorrect error. He probably meant Murphy sickbay. Shaun replies, ‘I have stopped vomiting. Lea still has a fever and now has diarrhea. I think she’s upset with me but she has gone back to bed.’

Glassman takes a few moments to respond, Shaun knows he’s a slow typer. ‘Oh no. what did you do?’

Shaun shrugs, even though he knows Dr. Glassman can’t see it. ‘I don’t know. She wanted me to be less preachy and more supportive so I must not have been supportive enough. How can I be more supportive?’

Shaun stares at the undulating dots for a long time before the response comes back. ‘Hard to say but maybe ask what she needs without being too insistent and dont push things on her she doesn’t want’

‘I am worried about dehydration.’

‘Shaun, it’s only been half a day’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Gotta go. Take care, Ill check in later.’

Shaun doesn’t reply to that, is happy with that plan. He’s glad they are paying Pickles a visit. He hasn’t seen her in a while, feels slightly guilty about that, but work’s been so busy, and taking care of Finn seems to swallow up all of their free time these days, although they try to take trips to the farm as often as they can. Family time there is always time well spent.

Shaun follows the Weather Channel for a while, then goes to their streaming portal to check his personal list for those documentaries he had earmarked a while ago. He’s just about to finish one of them up when there’s a gentle rap on the apartment door.

He gets up to check who’s there, is surprised to see a familiar face standing outside—Tammy Greenberg.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

She gives him a smile. “Not the warm welcome I was hoping for.”

Oh no, is he being rude? “Hello Tammy,” he says for good measure.

“Hi Shaun, can I come in?”

“Oh,” he says, opening the door wider so she can walk in. “Yes.”

She’s carrying a basket of some sort, which she places on their kitchen island, then looks around and takes in the apartment. “This is a really nice place you have here. I like it, it has character.”

Shaun nods as he closes the door. “Lea found it when she was looking for an apartment, but it was too expensive for her to afford on her own, so we became roommates and shared the rent until I asked her to move out.”

That seems to make Tammy frown. “You asked her to move out?”

“Yes. Lea and I were not romantically involved at the time and Carly said Lea had to move out if I wanted her to keep being my girlfriend.”

“Okay. That sounds a little… drastic.”

Was it? It hadn’t seemed so at the time, and Lea was perfectly fine with it. He looks at Tammy. “Why are you here?”

“Well. Aaron mentioned you both came down with the stomach flu, and I…” she points at the basket, “I thought maybe you could use a little help. And maybe some extra TLC.”

She takes a larger food container out of the basket. “Best chicken soup there is, plus a few more things that you can try when you feel a little better.” She puts more containers on the kitchen island. “Can I put these in your fridge?”

Shaun points at it. “Yes.”

She turns to him after she’s put the things away. “Forgive me, I should have asked you first. How are you feeling? I just wanted to bring these by, I don’t wanna keep you if you’re still feeling cruddy.”

“No, I’m feeling much better, thank you.”

“Okay, that’s good to hear. How’s Lea?”

“She is sleeping. She said she had diarrhea earlier and wanted to… sleep it off.”

Tammy’s expression draws into a displeased grimace. “Oh no, poor thing. That’s honestly the worst.” She turns towards the door. “Well, I should probably be going. Unless you could use the company.”

Shaun ponders this for a moment, isn’t very sure. He isn’t exactly presentable in his bathrobe and unruly hair. At least he brushed his teeth earlier. But this is Tammy, and he knows he has a soft spot for Tammy because she’s always been so warm and welcoming and sympathetic.

“I… could use the company,” he tells her.

She gives him a warm smile, but Shaun has an afterthought. “It may not be safe for you to be here. Lea and I might be contagious. If you need to use our bathroom, we may have to disinfect the toilet.”

Now Tammy chuckles. “That’s okay, Shaun. Granted, I’m not keen on bringing this home with me, but I think it’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Have you eaten anything at all? Do you feel like giving anything a go?”

He can now definitely feel that giant gaping hole in his stomach from having expelled all of its contents a few hours ago. He does realize that some of his appetite has returned, which is definitely a good sign. “I think I would like some of the chicken soup.”

She nods at him appreciatively as she steps back to the fridge. “Okay, let me get that for you, then.”

“I will do it,” he says quickly.

“Let’s do it together.”

He gets a bowl out of the cabinet while Tammy is already opening drawers to find the cutlery. He opens the cabinet door that hides the microwave. “The microwave is in there.”

“Okay, great. Do you maybe want some buttered toast to go with it?”

“I… don’t know. Maybe just the soup first.”

“All right, you got it. Just soup it is.”

Shaun places the bowl in the microwave after Tammy has filled it with some soup. It smells nice and he’s definitely looking forward to the light meal now.

As they wait for the kitchen appliance to do its thing, Shaun gestures at the table. “Please sit.” Even though his brain still feels a bit muddy, he actually remembers the basics of hospitality. “Do you want anything to drink? Although we only have water and milk, we were supposed to go grocery shopping today. I can make you coffee the way Lea likes it. We have regular and decaf.”

“Water is just fine, thank you.”

Shaun fills a glass from the faucet and sets it in front of Tammy, goes back to the kitchen counter when the microwave dings to take out the soup and carry it to the table.

He eats in silence while Tammy takes a sip from her water glass. The soup tastes nice—not too salty and even though he can taste a hint of garlic, it’s not too pungent or dominant. It feels good to get something in his empty stomach. He’s definitely glad that Tammy decided to stop by.

She looks at him. “Looks like my soup is definitely met with approval.”

“Yes, it tastes very good.”

“That’s wonderful to hear, and I think a clear sign that you’re on the mend. Now we need to get Lea there.”

Shaun feels the underlying worry nagging at him again. “She needs to drink.”

“I hope you don’t mean alcohol.”

He’s about to protest, but then sees her grin and puts two and two together. “You were making a joke.”

Her smile widens. “I was. Are you worried that Lea isn’t getting enough fluids?”

“Yes. She has been throwing up all morning and hasn’t had anything to drink at all.”

“Well, you’re the doctor, but it hasn’t even been a full day yet. I don’t think I’d be worrying too much in your stead.”

Shaun swallows another spoonful of soup. “That’s what Dr. Glassman said.”

“Yeah, and he’s a doctor, too. I mean, it’s only natural to worry about your loved ones. I think you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think I am.”

Tammy is frowning now. “What do you mean?”

“Lea said I was being too preachy and not supportive enough.”

“She said that?”

“Yes.”

“In those words?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Well, is it possible you were maybe a little too… insistent? Or overbearing?”

That’s a good question. “I don’t think I was.”

“Shaun, I think Lea is usually pretty good with your way of saying and doing things, but maybe you need to consider that she’s ill and may be a little more irritable than usual.”

“So… you think I irritated her?”

“I can’t tell you that, I wasn’t privy to your conversation.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Would you like me to talk to her if she wakes up before I leave?”

Shaun shrugs slightly. He doesn’t need other people to solve his problems for him.

Tammy must have read something in the gesture, or maybe in his expression, because she says, “I’m sorry, Shaun. I didn’t mean to imply that you couldn’t sort out your own affairs. I’m just offering to help. You’ve both been sick, you’re probably both a little raw right now.”

“It’s okay,” he tells her, wonders if he could get more advice from someone of the opposite gender, because maybe that plays into it as well. “How can I be more supportive for Lea when she’s sick?”

“That’s hard for me to say, I don’t know how Lea gets when she’s sick. Some people get a little more clingy, some people just wanna be left alone, some people try to toughen it out but deep down really want to be cuddled.”

“I don’t think the latter applies to Lea.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think it would.”

Shaun eats the last spoon of the soup after tilting the bowl. “She told me not to ask a million questions and to just be there.”

“And you can’t do that?”

“What does she mean to just be there? Do I sit with her in the bedroom? Does she want me to lie in bed with her? Should I ensure I don’t leave the apartment? Should I be able to anticipate what she may need? How do I *know* what she may need?”

Tammy’s mouth curves into a smile. “Oh dear, that’s certainly a lot of questions.”

“Yes. Can you answer them?”

“I can only guess, but I think she may just want you to be around when she does actually need something. I don’t think she meant you had to hover over her or be physically close all the time.

“She just wants to be reassured that someone’s there when she, I don’t know, wants something to eat or drink, when she feels like she wants your company or a conversation or a hug, when she wants you to bring her something because it’s too much effort to get out of bed. And I think she knows you well enough that she will actually ask because she knows you’re not always good with non-verbal communication.”

“I think she does.”

“Does that help answering your question?”

“Yes, I think it does. Thank you.”

Her smile is warm and loving when she says, “You’re welcome, Shaun. Now, if *you* want some extra love or a hug, you will let *me* know, won’t you?”

He appreciates the gesture, but… “I don’t want you to contract this virus.”

She gets up from her seat and walks around the table to where he’s sitting, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder as she takes the spoon with the other and puts it in the bowl to clear them away. He instinctively leans into the touch, not even sure why, but Tammy is someone he trusts, one of the few people who has hugging privileges.

Maybe Tammy read it, she probably did because she’s really good at reading Shaun, and she puts the bowl back on the table, puts her other hand on his other shoulder, giving them a gentle rub and squeeze.

Shaun feels himself relax, some of the tension he didn’t even know he held fall away. The back of her fingers gently touch his forehead. “You feel a little warm. Were you running a fever?”

“Dr. Glassman said my temperature was elevated. I don’t feel feverish now. Lea is running a fever, she had chills earlier. Her body temperature was higher than mine.”

“It sounds like it hit her a lot harder than you.”

“I’m exposed to more germs than her at the hospital. My immune system may be better equipped to handle the infection.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

Her hand goes back to his shoulder as she asks, “Do you want any more soup?”

Shaun still welcomes the calming touch. “No, thank you.”

He wishes she didn’t pull her hands back when she does to carry the soup bowl to the kitchen sink. “Still don’t want that buttered toast?”

“No, thank you,” he repeats. His stomach feels nicely warm and filled for now.

“But you know what? I’d actually like to take you up on that coffee now if it’s not too much to ask.”

Shaun immediately gets up to join her in the kitchen. “It is not. Do you want regular or decaf?”

“Decaf isn’t real coffee, Shaun.”

He smiles. “That is what Lea says, too.”

“See, you married a smart woman.”

“It is not that smart. Caffeine can interfere with deep sleep.”

“I have been drinking caffeinated coffee pretty much every day of my adult life, and I sleep just fine.”

“Then your body has gotten accustomed to the regular intake and you have most likely developed a caffeine dependence.”

“Uh oh, that sounds a little disconcerting.”

“It is.” Shaun gets the coffee grounds out of the overhead cabinet and starts prepping the machine. “You would most likely develop withdrawal symptoms such as headaches if you stopped ingesting it regularly. More severe symptoms can include muscle pain and stiffness, lethargy, nausea, vomiting, depressed mood and marked irritability.”

“Oh wow, now you’re really digging into it.”

“But it might not apply to you, research indicates that only 50% of habitual coffee drinkers will experience withdrawal symptoms.”

“Well, then let’s hope I’m going to dodge that bullet if I ever have to stop drinking coffee.”

Both of them turn around when the door of the bedroom opens and Lea hurries to the bathroom, rolling the door closed behind her. Tammy turns back to Shaun. “Do you think it would be better if I left?”

“Why? I just started making you coffee.”

“No, that’s not— Shaun, Lea might be uncomfortable with me being here when she’s, you know, sick and out of sorts.”

He tries to gauge what Tammy is saying. “You mean because of the noises?”

“Yes, and because, you know, she’s feeling rough and vulnerable, maybe she’s a little embarrassed.”

“Can you not ask her?”

Tammy chuckles. “Sure I can, but the damage will be done by the time I ask the question.”

Shaun flicks the switch on the coffee machine and it sputters to life. “I think it will be okay.”

Tammy squints her eyes at him. “Are you sure?”

“No.”

She turns to the kitchen island to get the basket that was standing there, is just stepping over to the door when the bathroom door opens.

Lea hesitates a moment when she notices who the visitor is, runs her fingers through her hair. “Oh God, have you been here the whole time?”

Tammy takes a step closer to the door. “Hello Lea, I’m sorry, I was just about to leave.”

Lea edges closer, “Please don’t leave on my account. I mean, you already got the full brunt of it.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’ve raised two children and as many grandkids. Believe me, I’ve seen it all.”

Lea sighs. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Hello Tammy.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Honestly? Like crap.”

Shaun asks her, “Did you not sleep?”

“No, I did. But I’m pretty sure I’m still running a fever, and obviously my guts are still fighting whatever it is that’s taken up residence in there. I just feel really drained and logy.”

Shaun hesitates a moment, knows he wants very badly to help her, but still isn’t sure how to best approach that without being preachy or obtrusive. He takes a few steps closer to where she stands. “I… am here if you need anything. Do you want company or a conversation or a hug?”

It takes her a moment to react, he thinks maybe her brain is also very sluggish, but she actually steps closer to him. “Yes, I would like a hug.”

That, he can definitely do, but he approaches it carefully and tests the waters before he puts his arms around her. She’s definitely still radiating body heat as she leans into him. “Can you make this stop?” she mumbles into his chest.

“We have medication that will help.”

She pushes away just a little. “Shaun, I don’t know if I can drink your ginger and Pepto concoction. I know it helped, but it tasted pretty terrible the first time around. The thought alone makes me gag right now.”

It is Tammy who supplies, “I may actually be able to help with that.” She reaches into the basket and produces a small cardboard package. “These dissolve in your mouth, definitely came in handy last time Theo came down with the runs. I wasn’t sure how well you were stocked in terms of anti-diarrhea medication.”

Shaun is actually impressed. “That is very good thinking. We don’t have anything in an orodispersible formulation.”

Tammy takes out two tablets and holds them out to Lea. “You take two initially and then one after each following spell. I’ll leave them here on the counter.”

Lea gratefully takes them and puts the two tablets in her mouth. “Thank you, you’re a lifesaver.”

Shaun is still worried, knows he shouldn’t be addressing his concern, but it’s nagging at him. “Lea…”

She looks at him. “I had half a glass of the Gatorade.”

He lets out a relieved breath. “That’s good.”

“I’ll try to drink more. I know it’s important.”

“Tammy brought us chicken soup.”

She nods tiredly. “That’s great, but I think I’ll have to save that for later.”

Tammy indicates the fridge. “There’s more than just soup—a few things from the garden, a jar of homemade apple sauce. You should be all set for the next day or two. I can also make a run to the supermarket if you want. You mentioned you needed groceries.”

“No,” Lea immediately says. “Aaron can help with that, although I’m not sure we actually need anything right now.”

“It’s really not a problem, you just have to tell me where the nearest supermarket is.”

Shaun adds, “We need non-dairy yogurt for Finn, and we are on the last package of oat milk. Dr. Glassman used a lot of it when he made porridge for Finn this morning.”

“Well, Finn isn’t here right now, is he?” Lea counters.

Tammy suggests, “Okay, how about we make a shopping list, Shaun, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Lea supplies, “He inherited Shaun’s palate, he only eats very specific brands.”

“Okay, not a problem. Tell me what they are and where to get them. You know what brands they are, don’t you?”

Shaun immediately says, “Yes, we do.”

Tammy lifts her arms. “Well, there we go.”

“It will be easier if I come with you.”

“Nonsense, Shaun, you’re still sick. It’ll be my fun mission for the day. I actually like grocery shopping.”

Lea doesn’t seem to want to intervene in their new plan, now turns to head to the couch. “Is it okay if I watch some TV? I’m kinda sick of the bed and I don’t think I can sleep anymore.”

Shaun nods. “Of course.”

While Lea relocates to the couch, Shaun goes to fetch a sheet of paper and a pen from the desk and sits back down at the table opposite Tammy. In neat handwriting, he starts putting together the grocery list from memory, sorting it by location nearest to the supermarket entrance and the path you would normally take to find the items. He makes sure to list out all the exact brands where possible, leaving asterisks for notes as well.

He vaguely registers after a few minutes that Tammy gets up to go to the kitchen. Ah yes, the coffee, he had forgotten about that. With a quick glance he realizes that Tammy seems to be capable of pouring herself a mug of coffee and by the time she returns back to the table, Shaun is almost done with the grocery list.

Finishing it off with the last two items, he pushes it over to Tammy. “This is everything we need. I have sorted it by supermarket section and noted down all the brands for products where it applies. The items with a circled X behind them are those where you should not be buying a different brand if the one I listed is not available. The other items can be off-brand or a different brand if necessary.”

Tammy is studying the list, then says, “Thank you, this is very thorough.”

“Do you have any questions?”

She lets out a chuckle. “No, I don’t think so.”

Shaun points to the bottom of the list. “I have also written down the name and address of the supermarket. Does your car have a GPS?”

“It does.”

Shaun lets out a short hum of approval, then adds, “The drive should not take longer than eight minutes, and it is less crowded at this time of day than it is in the morning.”

Tammy lifts her coffee mug. “Well, can I finish my coffee first?”

“Yes,” Shaun quickly confirms. Of course she can. Did he imply otherwise? “Did I make you think that you had to adhere to a time schedule?”

She laughs softly. “No, Shaun, I was trying to tease you a little.”

“Oh. I am not very good with that.”

She nods. “I know. I’m sorry, I probably should have phrased that differently.”

“It’s okay. You can finish your coffee. Or anything else that you want to do before you leave. Please bring the receipt so that we can reimburse you.”

She nods. “Yes, good thinking. Anything else you want me to consider that’s not on here?”

“No. The list has everything we need.”

Tammy takes another sip of the coffee, then downs the last remnants in the mug. “Very well, I shall be off, then.”

“You can call my phone if you have any questions while you are shopping.”

She laughs again. “That’s good to know, but I think I’ll be fine. Please don’t worry, Shaun. I’ve got this.”

“Okay,” he confirms again.

His eyes trail Tammy as she leaves the apartment, and he hears the TV in the background. From the title theme playing, it sounds like Lea has put on an old episode of *Friends*. He knows that’s one of her go-tos when she wants something comfortable and easily digestible to watch.

He hesitates a moment, then ambles over to the couch. Lea is lying there with knees drawn up, wrapped in the Pendleton blanket. He stands next to the couch, watches the scene on the TV for a moment, then asks her, “Do you want me to watch *Friends* with you?”

She looks at him. “You hate *Friends*.”

He shrugs. “I don’t hate it. I don’t see what is humorous about it, and the volume of the fake laughs is too loud in relation to the dialogue.”

“That sounds to me like you hate it.”

“I… will watch it with you if you would like me to.”

“We can watch something else that we both like.”

“N-no,” he tells her. “*Friends* is your Weather Channel.”

That makes her chuckle softly. “It’s not my *only* Weather Channel.”

“How can you have multiple Weather Channels?”

“How can you only have *one* Weather Channel?”

“There *is* only one Weather Channel.”

“Wait, are we talking about the actual channel now or the metaphor?”

Shaun has lost track. “We are talking about *Friends*.”

Lea draws her knees up a little to make more room for him. “Honestly, I don’t really care all that much what we’re watching. Just… something easily digestible that doesn’t need much brain power. Cause I’m fresh outta that.”

“You like *How To Train Your Dragon*.”

“You know what? Let’s watch *Brave*.”

Yes, the animated movie with the feisty young Scottish princess, Shaun remembers it. “Okay.”

He takes the remote control and pulls it up from their VOD listing. About a third through it, he notices that Lea has fallen asleep again, but Shaun actually likes the movie and keeps watching until Tammy comes back with the groceries about three quarters of an hour later.

He lets Lea sleep and helps Tammy put away the groceries, making sure that everything goes in its designated place. Tammy seems to have found all the right items except for one particular jar of baby food that they were out of, but she bought two extra of another one that was on the list, which Shaun thinks is a good compromise.

When everything is sorted out and nicely stored where it needs to go, Tammy puts her canvas bag back into the basket that's standing on the kitchen island, then turns to Shaun. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes," Shaun confirms.

"All right. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, thank you."

"Okay. Well, I think I'll be off then, unless you'd like me to stay a bit longer."

"You can go," Shaun tells her.

She nods. "Very well. Please call me if you find that you need anything else later, okay? Really, I'm happy to help."

"We won't," Shaun reassures her.

It makes Tammy chuckle, although Shaun isn't quite sure why. He didn't think he said anything funny.

She seems to hesitate, and Shaun tries to gauge why. Is there something she forgot? "Did you forget anything?"

"No, just trying to figure out how to ask if you want a goodbye hug."

"Oh. No, thank you. I told you before I may be contagious."

"Yes, you did. I'll leave you to it, then. I'll see you around, Shaun. Don't be a stranger."

"I won't."

He quietly closes the door behind Tammy and then checks on Lea, who is still sleeping. Shaun can now feel his own energy waning. He is definitely feeling better, but he has to admit that his body is still trying to recover.

He gets the bottle and the glass of Gatorade from the bedroom, takes another few sips before he puts both on the coffee table, then goes to get the ones for Lea as well because she will have a lot more fluid intake to catch up on, and he knows he has to find a way to nudge her into that when she awakes.

He settles on the couch next to Lea and takes the remote control to pick up the movie where he left off. It's definitely a good one that he also enjoys the second time around.

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By the time that evening rolls around, Shaun isn't even really sure what he's done all day. Thankfully, his stomach seems to have settled now and he's had a few of the more easily digestible foods that Tammy had brought. He had particularly enjoyed the homemade apple sauce.

Lea isn't quite so lucky, she has a few more spells of diarrhea despite the medication, although she says it's not as bad as in the morning. Shaun has hopes that she, too, will be getting there. He's managed to coax her into drinking another half glass of the Gatorade, but her fever is still noticeable, and Shaun tries his best to leave her alone when she indicates that's what she prefers.

They're both in bed by 10 pm that night, and Shaun feels tired, even though he's slept quite a lot today. Lea lets out a little moan next to him and he turns around to face her.

"Are you in pain?"

She makes a face. "Yeah, my joints are kinda achy."

"That is very normal. It's part of your body's immune reaction to the virus."

She sighs. "Yeah, I know. I think my fever is getting worse."

"That is also normal. Body temperature tends to be higher in the evening because immune cell activity decreases at night. You should take some of the acetaminophen suspension."

"Yeah," she mumbles but doesn't actually do it.

"Do you need help?"

"No."

Shaun waits but Lea doesn't move. "Lea?"

She hums next to him.

"You should take some of the acetaminophen."

"Yeah, I know."

Shaun isn't sure if he should be getting worried. Maybe he already is. He gets up and walks over to Lea's side of the bed and picks up the acetaminophen bottle, then sits down on her mattress. "Lea?"

"Shaun…" she says, and he knows it's her tone of voice when she's impatient or annoyed with him.

He gently nudges her thigh. "This will help with the joint pain and the fever."

“Shaun, can you leave me alone, please?”

“No,” he says, maybe more assertively than he intended. “I would like—” He stops himself, repeats it in a calmer tone. “I would like you to take some of this. It will help.” For good measure, he adds. “Please.”

Maybe that did something because Lea stirs and turns around. “Will you leave me alone after that?”

“Yes,” he confirms.

He pours an adequate dose of the suspension onto the spoon that’s still lying there, holds it out to Lea and watches her take it. She burrows back into the covers afterwards.

As he goes back to his side of the bed, the thought occurs to him that maybe there’s another question he should be asking. “Do you want me to sleep in Finn’s room?”

She opens her eyes to look at him. “No. Unless you want to.”

He doesn’t want to. They had sold the guest bed when Finn was on the way to have enough room for the baby furniture and for him to play on the floor, so it would be the old air mattress at best, maybe the couch if he wanted to be more adventurous, but he also knows from experience the couch isn’t the most comfortable place to spend the night.

“I don’t want to,” he tells her.

She confirms that with another hum, then adds tiredly, “I might wake you.”

“I know. You are sick. It will be okay.”

“Can you switch off the light?” she mumbles.

He does so and the room falls into a comfortable darkness with some of the street lights outside providing faint illumination through the drawn curtains.

He lies on his back for a long time, listening to Lea’s breathing next to him, hoping she’ll feel better in the morning, wondering if he’ll want to call in sick or not.

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As expected, the night isn’t very restful. Lea makes several trips to the bathroom, wakes him up once or twice by tossing and turning. He switches off the alarm before it can go off, knowing he’s not going to be in any state to treat or operate on patients today. He emails Dr. Lim and HR to call in sick before he turns on his side to try and catch some more sleep.

When he wakes up two hours later, he feels a lot more rested and awake. He’s somewhat surprised that Lea’s side of the bed is empty, so he pushes away the covers and gets out of bed. He finds her sitting at the table in her pajamas and nightgown with a mug in front of her.

He walks over, inquiring, “Are you feeling better?”

“Morning,” she greets him, and that alone tells him she must be. “I think my fever finally broke.”

He sits down across from her. “What are you drinking?”

“Chamomile tea. Figured that couldn’t hurt.”

“It doesn’t, you need a lot of fluids. Have you eaten anything?”

She draws in a breath. “You are such a fussbudget. Shaun, I’m fine. I had half a banana.”

“I could have made you breakfast.”

“Yeah, I know, but you were still sleeping and I thought you needed the rest. Are you calling in sick today?”

“I already emailed the hospital.”

“Yeah, I’ll need to do that, too. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“You were really out of it earlier.”

“I was tired. You woke me up six times during the night.”

She meets his eyes. “I’m sorry, but I said last night I probably would.”

“I know. I feel a lot better now. I am glad you are also feeling better.”

She rubs a hand down one side of her face. “Yeah, I’m still not super great, but I think my bowels have finally calmed it with their rebellious streak and I feel like maybe I can be an actual human being again in a day or two.”

The apartment is eerily quiet, and Shaun looks at the open door to the nursery. “Do you want Finn to stay with Dr. Glassman for another day?”

She seems to consider that for a moment. “I don’t know. I’m still not really in any shape to take care of a feisty toddler. Do you feel like you could handle him on your own today?”

Shaun’s stomach rumbles, and he knows he needs to eat something, but he thinks he’ll be fine with looking after their son for a day. “Yes, I think so.”

“Okay. Well, check in with Glassy. If I had to guess, he probably dropped him off at daycare, seeing how we didn’t cancel that. Or did you?”

“No, I did not. Dr. Glassman might have if he’s not working today.”

“Yeah. Give him a call, maybe, to sort that out.”

“Yes,” Shaun says, “I will.”

Shaun gets up to go to the kitchen, trying to decide what he wants to eat. Milk or orange juice might not be the best choice on an empty, recovering stomach. He’s not much of a tea person,

but he thinks maybe that's the better option, paired with a bit of lightly buttered toast, even though that's very outside his normal morning routine.

He turns to Lea, "I will make some buttered toast. Do you want any? Or the rest of your banana or more tea?"

She lifts her mug slightly. "No, I'm good for now."

"The banana is getting brown."

"Yeah, I know. I wasn't sure how much of it I would be eating."

"Can I put it in the fridge?"

"Yeah, please do. Thanks, Shaun."

He extracts a food container in the right size from one of the drawers and puts the banana away while the water for the tea is getting ready to boil and the toast is in the toaster.

Lea's phone vibrates on the table and she picks it up to look at it. "Oh. There's Glassy, he's asking if we wanna have our son back today. He says he's in daycare right now. Want me to text him back that you'll pick him up later?"

"Okay," Shaun agrees.

Lea eventually relocates to the couch while Shaun showers, does his morning routine and gets dressed after he's eaten. With something a little more substantial in his stomach, he feels like he can brave this day, even handle a "feisty toddler", although he thinks most of the time Finn isn't even that feisty.

He tells Lea he'll be taking the car to pick Finn up from daycare, is now looking forward to spending some quality time with his son. Finn is playing with his best friend Kieran as he arrives, briefly talks to Meghan in daycare to explain why he's picking Finn up early.

Finn immediately jumps up when he sees Shaun and runs towards him with an excited, "Daddy!"

Shaun can't help but smile and lets Finn hug his legs, tries to figure out what his son is trying to tell him in somewhat intelligible words. He holds out his hand for Finn to take it and tells him, "We will be going home."

"Home to mommy?"

"Yes."

"Mommy is sick."

"Yes, she is. But she is getting better."

"Are you sick?"

"I am feeling much better. You will spend time with me today."

“Spend time with daddy,” Finn proclaims, and Shaun takes that as assent as he walks towards the elevator with his son holding his hand.

One of the scrub nurses greets him as he passes by with a, “Hello Dr. Murphy.”

“Hello,” Shaun greets back.

Finn giggles down by his side. “Why said he Dr. Murphy?”

“That’s my name.”

“No, your name is Shaun.”

“Yes. Dr. Shaun Murphy.”

“You’re a doctor.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Doctor Shaun.”

Shaun has to smile. That brings back memories of old, it’s still what Theo calls him when they see each other. Finn has made the connection as well, because he asks, “Can we go visit Theo?”

“No, not today.”

Finn stops walking, which makes Shaun stop as well. “I want to visit Theo.”

“Yes, I know. You went to the farm with your grandfather yesterday.” He tries to coax Finn to keep walking, which he reluctantly does.

“Theo wasn’t there. Where was he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know that, either.”

“I want to visit Theo,” Finn repeats as Shaun stops in front of the elevator and pushes the button to go down.

“Yes, you already said that.”

“Daddy, can we visit Theo?”

“No, I already told you that we can’t go to the farm today.”

“Why?”

That is actually a good question. Shaun figures they probably could, but he also doesn't really want Lea to be all on her own today. "Your mother is sick and Theo will be in school today. He will not be at the farm."

"Mommy is sick," Finn repeats, and Shaun is glad that apparently he's no longer pressuring for a farm visit or meeting Theo.

He often finds it's hard to get Finn to understand reasoning, and that's a struggle for Shaun, too. More times he can count, this has ended with Finn crying for no reason and Shaun unsure how to console him. He's eternally learning how to cater to the intellect of a two-year-old, tries to study and emulate how Lea handles these situations, makes sure to ask her what he did wrong or how he could improve when he hits another impasse that results in a Finn tantrum.

Shaun's phone vibrates in his pants pocket and he quickly checks it. It's a message from Lea that she's going to lie down again for a while, which Shaun interprets as, "Please try to be quiet when I get home." He isn't sure how well that's gonna work with Finn in tow, but at least he now knows to try.

Finn is quickly strapped into his car seat, babbles seemingly meaningless but contented sentences as they drive through downtown San Jose to their apartment building. He asks a few questions that Shaun tries to answer as best as he can while also trying to concentrate on the road and the traffic. He still finds it tricky to hold conversations while he's driving, although it has gotten easier with time and practice.

As he and Finn walk through their building to their apartment door, Shaun briefly stops. "Finn," he addresses his son, "Your mom is sleeping right now. Please don't wake her up."

"Mommy sleeping?"

"Yes. You need to be quiet when we get home, okay?"

Finn starts walking again and pulls at Shaun's hand. "Mommy."

"Did you understand what I said?"

"Mommy is quiet."

"No, you need to be quiet because your mommy is sleeping. She is still sick."

"Okay," Finn says, and Shaun hopes the message was received.

Shaun tries to be extra quiet when he unlocks the apartment door, lets go of Finn's hand when they enter and he takes off his jacket, asks Finn to wait and then takes off Finn's jacket and shoes, helps him into his slippers.

Shaun is still removing his own shoes when he hears Finn say, "Mommy?"

Before Shaun can give chase to stop him, Finn runs to the bedroom door on his little legs and enters through the door that wasn't fully closed.

Shaun follows him quickly, sees that Lea is awake, watching how Finn comes around the bed to her side.

“You left the door open,” Shaun says, “I wasn’t fast enough.”

“It’s okay,” she says, sitting up, holding her arms out to help Finn climb onto the bed with her. “Come here, you little monster.”

“No,” Finn protests as he sits down on his mommy’s legs. “I am not a monster. I’m a pooper.”

Lea laughs softly. “You’re both. You’re a monster pooper.”

Finn laughs too. “Monster pooper.”

Shaun wants to roll his eyes. “Don’t tell him these things. He will repeat it all day.”

As if to prove Shaun’s point, Finn goes, “Monster pooper,” then repeats it louder, “Monster pooper!”

Shaun sighs. “This is what I said.”

Lea laughs again. “I think it’s funny.” She looks at Finn and takes his hands to move them up and down. “Monster pooper.”

“Monster pooper,” Finn repeats with a giggle.

Lea looks at Shaun. “Did everything go okay?”

Shaun is confused. “Yes. Why?”

“Well, you picked him up early. That’s probably a little out of the ordinary.”

“I explained it to them.”

“Yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you couldn’t handle it.”

The conversation is cut short by Finn crawling around the bed with more exclamations of, “Monster pooper,” which has Shaun sigh inwardly.

He picks Finn up from the bed, looks at his watch. “It is time for your lunch in twenty-three minutes.”

Finn lets out an excited little sound. “I want pancakes!”

He sees Lea turning her head at Shaun and she is smiling, but Shaun interjects with, “We are not having pancakes.”

“Monster pancakes!”

“We are not having monster pancakes, either.”

“Rampa made pancakes,” Finn explains. “With chocolate chips.”

Of course he did. Shaun knows it's one of the things he can cook very well. When Shaun sets Finn down on the floor, Lea suggests, "Here's an idea. Why don't you take him to Veggie Garden? They have a lunch buffet, don't they? You could go to the playground in the park afterwards."

Shaun looks at his watch again. "There's not enough time."

"Shaun, remember what we said? He doesn't have to have lunch at exactly 12:30 every day. He won't starve if he gets lunch half an hour later for one day. Come on, you know he'll love it, and it'll save you the extra work of making him something and cleaning up and all of that."

Finn seems to have registered part of that conversation as well, so he tugs at Shaun's hand, "Daddy, go to the park!"

Well, it seems that's now been decided, so Shaun tries to push away the annoyance of not adhering to their schedule. That's one of the things he still struggles with, too. There's always one disruption or another where Finn is concerned, keeping to fixed schedules with a two-year-old toddler is not an easy task at all.

"Okay," Shaun agrees. "We will have lunch at Veggie Garden and then I will take you to the park."

Finn emits a loud sound of approval and runs out of the room. Shaun gives Lea another look, and she just shrugs with a small smile on her face. "Go and have fun."

"Do… you want me to bring you any food?"

"I know you hate it, but maybe some of the mushroom porridge? I think that could be really nice."

Shaun shudders. Yes, he hates it, but he will definitely do this for his ailing wife. "Okay."

Finn comes back with one shoe awkwardly on his foot, the other in his hand. "Daddy, help me."

He takes the shoe from Finn. "Okay, I will help you."

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Lea hears the door click in its lock when Shaun and Finn leave for their lunch and playground adventure and feels a strange mix of relief and regret.

There was never any doubt that she'd love her children unconditionally, and having Finn be away overnight was like something was missing from her life, but she still doesn't feel up to par right now and can't help but relish the peace and quiet.

She also loves Shaun from the bottom of her heart, knows that he can't always go against his nature, but his worried fussing these last two days wasn't always easy to take in stride, especially with her own defenses down and her patience wearing a little thin.

She knows she still has a slightly elevated temperature, but finally she feels a little more human again, decides to take that shower she's been yearning for. Dressed in her comfy home clothes, she settles on the couch and puts on another episode of *Friends*, gets her phone to answer a few

messages from friends she's ignored in the last day or two and starts checking all her social media feeds.

Glassy checks in again as well, his usual occasional autocorrect blunder showing that always makes her smile. She texts him back that she's on the mend and that Shaun and Finn are out father-son adventuring.

Thankfully, her appetite is also coming back, so she warms up a little of the chicken soup from Tammy, having just started eating it with a slice of dry toast when she can hear familiar noises outside their apartment of her son's sulky crying, and sure enough, soon thereafter the apartment door opens with an unhappy Shaun dragging a sullen and sobby-crying Finn behind him.

Lea's attention is immediately drawn to Finn's face, which is adorned with a visible red scratch across his cheek, the area around it red and a little swollen. She ignores her soup and turns sideways on the chair to pick up Finn who is now running towards her with renewed cries.

She lifts him onto her lap, gently brushing through his hair with her fingers. "Hey, Finnie, come here, it's okay. Did you get hurt?"

She addresses Shaun who's hanging his jacket on one of the hooks by the door. "What happened?"

Shaun is wearing his mopey face, clearly something didn't exactly go right. "A child hit him with a toy shovel."

"Another child hit him? Unprovoked?"

"No. He took her sand mold."

"Did he ask if he could have it?"

"No. She didn't want him to have it, so he took it without her consent."

Finn's crying is now subsiding and morphing into sad little sobs. "Finnie," Lea says in a chiding tone. "We don't just take other children's toys without asking."

Finn lets out another teary sob. Lea has more questions for Shaun. "So then the girl just hit him when he took the mold?"

"Yes."

"Okay. That's not really appropriate of the other kid, though, either."

"Yes. The mother apologized to me, then she reprimanded her daughter."

"Okay. Did you tell Finn that he shouldn't be taking other children's toys?"

"Yes, but he was crying very loudly."

"Yeah, he got hit in the face, of course he was crying. It's just a scratch, right?"

“Yes, possibly a minor contusion. It should heal quickly.”

As Shaun goes to the nursery, Lea looks at Finn’s cheek a little closer, but purely from a medical point of view, it doesn’t seem immediately concerning. She knows Shaun would be more upset if it was. Of course she doesn’t like seeing her son hurt, but she also knows it’s part of the learning process, of testing and understanding boundaries.

Shaun comes back, a pacifier in his hand that he holds out to Finn. The latter immediately takes it and puts it in his mouth.

“Did he cry all the way home?”

“Not the whole way.”

“You tried to comfort him, right?”

“Yes. It didn’t work very well.”

Shaun’s mopey face is back, and Lea reaches out to take his hand. She gently nudges him to sit down in the chair next to her.

Her heart goes out to her husband. It’s one of Shaun’s big concerns that he wouldn’t be able to offer the emotional support that a child would need, but one thing she is absolutely certain of is that he loves his son. He will have all the empathy in the world if his child is hurting and offer comfort in the best way that he can.

She strokes Finn’s hair again as he leans into her chest, now sucking on the pacifier, his sobs having subsided. She looks at Shaun. “Hey. I’m sure you did just fine. If he got hit in the face, that would have hurt, and he would have cried both from the physical pain and the momentary shock. Come on, you know that, and you shouldn’t be upset about it.”

“I do know that, but I still think I didn’t do very well.”

“No, Shaun, you would have done your absolute best, and I know that Finn feels safe with you.”

“He stopped crying when you picked him up.”

“Yeah, because he’s now over the initial surprise and his cheek is probably not hurting as much anymore. He’s also in a familiar environment here. If it had been me with him in the playground and you sitting here, it might have happened the exact same way. These situations don’t have a rulebook, you know? And kids can be unpredictable. He absolutely knows you love him.”

She looks down at Finn, touches his head. “You love your daddy, don’t you, little cricket?”

Finn hums in agreement around his pacifier, although Lea isn’t sure he’s fully understood the notion.

“Did lunch go okay, though? What did you have?”

Shaun recounts their meals, explains that he made extra sure Finn was getting his share of fruit and vegetables. He also regrets to inform her that there was no mushroom porridge today, so he didn’t bring anything.

“Bummer,” Lea comments.

Shaun eyes the bowl of soup on the table. “Do you want me to reheat your soup?”

“Yeah, would you? Bring a second spoon for Finn.”

Shaun takes the bowl to the microwave, commenting, “It is not his dinner time yet.”

“No, but it’s just clear broth. And you know he’ll want some if I’m having it.”

Now that Finn has stopped crying and seems to be calm again, she nudges him a little with her thighs. “Finnie, tell me about your day out. Did you have fun on the playground with Daddy? Other than the sandbox, what did you do?”

It sounds a little muffled by the pacifier when he says, “Schwim.”

“The swing? Did Daddy push you?”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“Sheep,” he says.

Lea knows what he means, there are animal-inspired spring rockers there. “The sheep rocker?”

Finn hums in agreement. She asks, “Did you go on the slide?”

He says something that’s a little garbled, so Lea takes the pacifier out of his mouth. “What was that?”

“The slide was wet.”

“Oh? It hasn’t been raining, why was it wet?”

Finn shrugs. “Don’t know.”

Shaun brings back the soup and sits back down next to her. “I think older children spilled their sodas on it.”

“Okay, that’s not nice. It’s good that Daddy told you not to use it if it was full of sticky soda.”

“Sticky soda,” Finn repeats.

“Yeah, sticky soda is nasty. We don’t want that.”

She tries a bit of the soup, thinks the temperature is fine for Finn and lets him have a little from her spoon. He seems happy with it and takes his own spoon to dunk it in the soup. Of course there’s an immediate mess because Finn doesn’t know how to put soup into his mouth without spilling it everywhere, but Lea grants him the experience.

Shaun is side-eyeing them, she knows he doesn't approve of the mess. Another hard lesson he's learning, that there's no such thing as a neat and clean apartment with a two-year-old toddler on the loose.

And because Shaun can't help it, he goes to at least get the bib that he fastens around Finn's neck.

After finishing the soup, Lea tries to decide if it was such a great idea to eat the whole bowl. Her stomach feels strangely bloated, even if it was just soup with a bit of toast. She wipes Finn's mouth with the bib and puts him down on the floor, then tells Shaun she'll go lie back down for a bit.

"Do you want to sleep?" he asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know. You don't have to be extra quiet. I just don't know if the food agrees with me yet."

He looks concerned now. "Do you need the bucket?"

"No, it's not that. I'll be okay, I think I just need to take it slow today."

"Okay. I will try to keep Finn away from you."

"I know we said we wanna limit his screen time, but you could watch some Word World with him."

From his expression, she can see he's not particularly fond of the idea but trying to weigh the pros against the cons. She's sure he'll come to whatever conclusion will work for him eventually.

In the bedroom, she closes the door behind her and connects her earphones to her phone. There's a podcast she's been meaning to catch up with, and too many audiobooks credits she hasn't redeemed yet.

She must have fallen back asleep over the *Bad Blood* audiobook, because she wakes up almost two hours later, still feeling a little sluggish but definitely better than before. She listens for a moment but the apartment is very quiet, so she wonders if Shaun has gone out again with Finn.

When she opens the bedroom door, she realizes that her assumption was wrong, because the picture that presents itself is sweet and adorable and makes her heart melt just a little. Shaun is lying on the couch, eyes closed, with Finn lying half on top of him, wedged between Shaun and the back of the couch. Both seem to be fast asleep.

As much as Shaun was always afraid he wouldn't be able to connect to his child, she's always known he would be absolutely fine in that regard, and this is just more proof that he's a great father and always will be.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, she wonders if she should let both of them sleep. Shaun could definitely use the rest after their recent virus induced ordeal, but if Finn sleeps too much during the day, she knows it will mess with his nightly sleep schedule, which in turn will mess with Shaun's routine as well.

She quietly walks over to the couch and gently nudges Finn who stirs and opens his eyes. She indicates to him to be quiet as she tries to lift him off of Shaun, who also stirs a little but doesn't wake up—clearly a sign that he's still a little out of sorts himself because he's not usually a very deep sleeper.

Finn snuggles against Lea's chest when she picks him up into her arms. The scratch on his cheek is still visible but it doesn't look very bad, and she thinks Shaun was right that it'll heal quickly. Just some collateral damage from a lesson learnt.

She takes him over to the kitchen, thinks she may finish the rest of that banana that she took a stab at in the morning. Finn rubs his face against her collarbone, then says, "Mommy not sick?"

"I'm okay. I'm feeling a lot better, Cricket."

"Is Daddy sick?"

"No, he's just tired. Let's let him sleep a little more, okay?"

"Okay," Finn easily agrees.

"Hey, why don't you go to your high chair and we'll have some banana at the table? What do you say?"

"Okay," he says again, and when she puts him down, he does as suggested. Lea knows he's figured out how to climb into his high chair by himself, and he's done it often enough now that they're comfortable he won't topple the whole thing over.

She looks in the fridge, decides to put together a small plate of healthy snacks for the both of them. Bless Tammy because there's a number of different things to choose from. She also fills Finn's sippy cup with some now cold fennel tea that Shaun must have made earlier and carries it over to the table, pulling the high chair closer to the table so that Finn can easily reach everything.

He goes right for the slices of red bell pepper, which isn't a surprise. He's definitely a bell pepper guy. As he wakes up a little more, he starts telling Lea whatever is on his two-year-old mind, and some of it she can't quite make sense of. His speech isn't always easy to understand, even though he's among the more articulate kids his age.

At some point he says, "Daddy Doctor Shaun."

That makes her smile. "Yes, he is. Your Dad is a doctor, he's a really great surgeon. Did Grandpa talk to you about that?"

"No," he shakes his head. "The blue woman at the hostital."

"You mean when Daddy picked you up from daycare?"

"Yes. The blue woman said Doctor Murphy."

"Oh yeah, that's what people call him at work. He's Dr. Murphy there. That's *your* last name, too. Finnian Murphy."

“Are you Doctor Lea?”

She chuckles. “No, I’m not a doctor, Cricket. I work with computers.”

“At the hostital?”

“Yeah, at the hospital.”

He takes a sip from his tea, bites off another piece of bell pepper while Lea has some more of the banana with some of the Gatorade that’s left over from earlier. Definitely feels good to be eating again.

Finn gets restless at some point, climbs down from the chair and goes to the nursery. When Lea’s finished her banana, she puts the dishes in the dishwasher as quietly as she can, then joins Finn in his room, closing the door behind them so that Shaun can sleep a little more undisturbed.

It’s the first time she really sees the crayon smeared wall up close, and part of her is amused at how that happened, part of her is trying to figure out how to get that off the wall. She’ll have to research that online, they won’t be the first parents to deal with this situation—not by a long shot.

She sits down on the floor, asks Finn, “You wanna play Picture Lotto?”

“Yes!” he said excitedly and is already going for the shelf that holds the cardboard box with the game.

Soon they have the cards laid out on the floor and start playing. Finn is the type of kid who gets really engrossed in games he likes, so he has Lea play several rounds with him. Of course he’s much better and faster than her. He’s got Shaun’s eye for detail for sure.

She and Shaun discussed early on how to look for signs of Finn possibly having ASD, but so far there’s been no indication of that. He’s hitting all the milestones, there have been no behaviors indicative of autism, and by now, as far as anyone can tell, Finn is a healthy, neurotypical child.

“Mommy, you go,” he urges her, and it pulls her from her momentary reverie.

She smiles at him. “You are way too clever for me.”

They play for a while, then Finn graduates to driving some of his larger toy cars over the road rug that’s in front of the chest of drawers, urging Lea to join in, pretend to be onlookers in the form of Duplo figures or drive the odd car this or that way. She indulges him, the easy-going activity is just the right thing with her mushy brain that’s still trying to get back to full capacity.

The nursery door opens at some point, Shaun peeking his head in before he opens the door wider. Finn looks up and happily greets him with an enthusiastic, “Daddy!”

Shaun just hums and Lea has to smile because his hair is flat against his head on one side and he looks adorably sleepy. “I fell asleep,” he states the obvious.

She nods. “You certainly did.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

She shrugs. “Figured you could use the extra rest. It’s been a rough couple of days.”

He joins them, sits down cross-legged on the floor, and immediately Finn puts a black-haired Duplo female in his hand. “Daddy, put her here.” He points to a space in front of Shaun on the rug.

Shaun does as he’s told, which Finn seems to be happy with, but when Shaun lets go of the figure, he explains, “No, she has to look at the cars.”

Shaun turns the figure a different angle. “She *is* looking.”

“No, you have to move her. Like this.”

Lea watches this with some amusement. Shaun hasn’t really gotten the whole two-year-old thinking process down to a tee. He tries to cater to Finn’s requests as best as he can, but Finn gets a little frustrated at some point that Shaun isn’t doing it the way that he wants, and takes the figure from Shaun to hand it to Lea.

“Mommy, you do it.”

Lea takes the figure but looks at Shaun. She knows he isn’t happy when Finn gets impatient with his ASD limitations, so she tries to find a compromise and picks up the male figure that’s lying next to her, giving the female back to Shaun and guiding his hand to a place on the rug by the side of a street.

“Your dad and I will be a married couple and watch together, okay?”

She hopes Shaun gets what she’s trying to do, because he doesn’t always understand subtle cues like this, but he’s constantly learning and getting better. She moves her figure around a little like she’s been doing with Finn before, encouraging Shaun to just imitate what she’s doing, which he does and follows suit. Finn seems to be happy with it, and it makes Shaun give Lea a brief but grateful look. Yep, they’ve got this.

They entertain Finn for a little while longer before Shaun turns his torso to point at the crayon drawing adorned wall. “We need to remove this.”

“Yeah, I’ll look into that tomorrow. It’s not urgent or anything.”

“And we need to teach Finn that he should not be drawing on walls. Or doors or furniture or other items that aren’t made for the purpose of being drawn on.”

“Yeah, and we will. If he really likes the more freeform way of drawing, we could maybe get him a whiteboard that we can put up on the wall at his height and then teach him that’s okay but the wall or furniture or other items aren’t.”

Shaun nods. “I like that idea.”

“Okay, I’ll look into it.”

“Are you going back to work tomorrow?”

“I don’t know yet. Maybe I’ll do a home office day. I still don’t really feel a hundred percent.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“You’re on day shift tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Can you drop Finn off at daycare?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, great. I can pick him up if your day gets busy.”

He lightly shrugs his shoulders. “I won’t know that before tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I know. We’ll figure it out.”

He smiles. “I will take the bus in the morning. Finn always likes it very much.”

“Yeah, wonder who he’s got *that* from…”

Shaun gives her a confused look. “What do you mean by that?”

She gets up from the floor and holds her hand out to Shaun to pull him up. “You have this thing with buses. You lived in one, once.”

“Not voluntarily.”

“Yeah, I know, but I think you and buses have a special connection. Well, except that one time when you almost got killed in one.”

“That was not the bus’s fault.”

She isn’t sure if that was a dry Shaun joke. “No, you’re right. And you know what’s doubly amazing?”

“No, but I think you will tell me now.”

“That despite being in that horrible bus crash, you still like taking them.”

“That bus crash was a coincidental happenstance. It is very unlikely that I will be involved in a second bus crash. Statistically, it is much more likely that I will be injured in a motor vehicle accident if I am driving or riding in a car.”

“Yeah, that is true.” She points to the kitchen. “Are you hungry at all?”

Shaun looks at his watch. “It is not dinner time yet.”

“No, but with all we’ve had going on these past two days, our schedules are pretty messed up anyway.”

“Which makes it even more important to return to our normal schedule.”

“So you wanna have dinner together with Finn at 6:30?”

He nods. “Yes. Are you hungry?”

“No, I had the rest of that banana earlier. I’m okay for now. Oh, and I let Finn snack on some of Tammy’s vegetables. Predictably, he loved the bell pepper.”

“Why did you give him food outside of his meal times?”

“Because I wanted to eat something, and you know how he gets with food. It was just a few pieces of raw bell pepper.”

Shaun still looks unhappy, and she knows it is because he likes routine. He’s mentioned to her several times that parenting books also recommend that you kept strict routines with your babies and toddlers.

She lightly touches his arm. “Hey. I know we should be sticking to a routine with Finn. It’s just… sometimes there needs to be wiggle room to adapt to certain situations. This was one of those times.”

It seems to placate him somewhat. “Okay.”

“Okay. We’ll have dinner at 6:30 as per usual.”

He seems happy with that.

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By the time both she and Shaun are in bed that night, Lea is still fighting off the last remnants of that unwelcome virus. There’s some remaining tenderness to her digestive system, but she hopes it’ll all clear over the next day.

Shaun seems to be back to his old self, inquires if he can do anything for her, but Lea is just tired and wants to sleep this off once and for all. This would be their sex schedule night, but they mutually agree to postpone until they’re both in better health.

After a restful night’s sleep, finally, Lea feels a lot more refreshed, although the working from home day will definitely help getting back to full form. Shaun is a champion and takes over Finn’s morning routine, insisting that he wants to make it as easy for her as possible, which she definitely appreciates.

When Shaun and Finn are out the door, she gets her laptop set up and starts catching up with what she missed.

The day is filled with work tasks, a few conference calls, and after she’s wrapped up all of the more urgent things and had a decent meal that seems to finally agree with her, thanks to the wonderful Tammy Greenberg, she goes to pick Finn up at hospital daycare.

As he often is, he’s a chatterbox and starts telling her all kinds of different things that happened during the day, asking her lots of questions that she tries to answer as best as she can. At home, she tries to keep him busy until it’s dinner time, hoping that Shaun will be home in time to eat

together and see his son, but as so often, he texts her that he needs to stay longer than anticipated.

She gets it, it happens, and patient care is important, but it's also not always easy with him being away so much. She knows he tries, and she also knows he wants to be there for as many of the big milestones for Finn as he can. Over two years in, they still have to find the right balance sometimes.

They've talked about Shaun cutting back on his hours, but if they want to buy a house some time so that Finn can have a bigger room and they can have a little more privacy than the two-bedroom apartment can offer, they need the money.

Dinner goes well, thankfully they've figured out how to cater to Finn's palate while still providing the necessary nutrition, and Lea has him in bed by his usual time. Just as Finn is trying to decide what book he wants being read to him, Lea hears the apartment door open, and she tells their son, "Hey, I think Daddy is home."

"Daddy is home!" Finn repeats happily.

"Yeah, let me go get him, he can read you your story."

She meets Shaun halfway in the living room, frowns a little because his expression is somewhat grim. "Hey. Bad day?"

"Yes," he just says.

"Okay. I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe you wanna tell me about it later? I was just getting ready to read Finn his bedtime story, I thought maybe you wanna do the honors tonight? He seemed pretty excited you were home."

She sees Shaun draw in a breath and raise his shoulders. Okay. It must have been a pretty terrible day if even story time with Finn can't elevate his mood. "It's okay, I can read to him," he offers. "Maybe you can do it tomorrow. At least say hi to him or sit with us to listen."

"No," Shaun says and walks past her, "I will read to him."

Lea tries to decide whether to follow him or not but decides to let him do his own thing. Despite being a demanding toddler, sometimes Finn helps him unwind and leave the stress of the work day behind. Maybe today he needs it more than usual.

Lea busies herself with a few chores, waits for Shaun to exit the nursery. When he does, he tells her, "He wants you to say good night."

"Okay," she agrees and checks in with Finn. Shaun has already switched off the lights except for the dim night light. Finn is all tucked in and she can tell he's tired. She adjusts his blanket and tells him, "Good night, Cricket. Sleep well."

"Good night, Mommy."

She stays for another long moment, then leaves with the door ajar. Shaun is by the fridge, and Lea goes to join him. "There's a bunch of Tammy's stuff left, I wasn't sure what you wanted to eat."

He closes the fridge door without taking anything out. There's an unhappy grimace on his face and she steps closer to take his hands, then waits to see how he responds to the gesture. He just stands there and lets her do it, but she senses the resistance, so she draws back.

"You not hungry?"

He just hums and she probes, "Let me help you, I can warm something up for you. What do you feel like?"

He sighs. "I don't know what I feel like."

"Okay, how about you go and watch some Weather Channel, and I'll make you a little selection of things you can choose from."

He doesn't seem happy with that, either. "You have already done all of Finn's evening routine, I don't need you to make me dinner."

"Yeah, so what? You took over all of his morning routine today. Team work, right? And I don't mind, it sounds like you had a sucky day. Let me try to make up for that."

He turns slightly away from her. "You can't make up for that."

She raises her eyebrows. "Okay. Maybe you wanna tell me what happened?"

"No," he just says and walks over to the couch, then predictably switches on the Weather Channel.

Lea sighs, but she knows it'll require patience. She knows not to pressure Shaun into talking when he doesn't want to, because usually that has the opposite effect.

She decides to leave it alone for now and table it for later. Sometimes Shaun needs to digest these things before he can verbalize his feelings, and she's learned to bring perseverance into their relationship.

She tries to decide whether she wants to make him pancakes, but opts for more savory options, starts preparing a smorgasbord from what their fridge still has to offer – a selection of sandwiches with different toppings, vegetables she knows he likes with some hummus on the side, a few pieces of the mild gouda, some sliced tomatoes with salt and a hint of pepper.

She's really quite proud of the selection when she's ready to present it to Shaun. She isn't sure it'll lift his mood, but there's really not much it can ruin by this point.

She takes it over to the couch and places it on the table in front of where Shaun is sitting. He acknowledges it wordlessly, then takes a piece of the turkey sandwich.

Before she can say anything, there's a bit of whiny crying from the nursery, so Lea goes to check on Finn. He seems only half awake but alert enough to notice that his favorite soft toy has somehow absconded from the bed, so she goes to pick it up and makes sure he can hold it. He's quickly mollified, clutching the well-worn gray donkey to his chest. She lingers another moment, but he stays quiet, so she goes back to join Shaun.

Not very much to her surprise, he's dug into a good portion of the food now, and it makes a small smile appear on her face.

Shaun looks at her when she sits down and goes for one of the pieces of cheese that's left. "I'm sorry," he says.

"Shaun, you don't need to apologize."

"You wanted to help and I was not very nice to you."

"Maybe not, but that's okay. Bad days happen. I'm not upset."

He sighs. "This was supposed to be different."

"Different? What do you mean?"

"I wanted to do something nice for you tonight."

"Something nice? Like what?"

He turns to her. "You have been sick and you told me I was not supportive enough. I wanted to be more supportive tonight. I was going to cook you a special dinner and open a bottle of our favorite wine and then give you a massage. Instead I got insulted by a patient and had to work late because she developed unexpected complications and couldn't do any of those things."

That has her attention right away. "You got insulted? For what?"

"For being autistic."

"Someone insulted you for having ASD?"

His jaw clenches before he says, "Yes."

"Was it a communication issue, did the patient misunderstand you, or did—"

"She said I shouldn't be a doctor," Shaun cuts in.

"Okay. Based on what…?"

"On the fact that I didn't look at her when Dr. Wolke, Dr. Powell and I explained the elective splenectomy to her, and that, according to her, I talked like a robot."

"That's a bit of a stretch."

Shaun hums as in, *'No, you don't understand,'* and then adds, "I told her I had autism, which didn't help her understand anything. She also made a derogatory comment about Dr. Powell's limp, and when Dr. Powell disclosed that she had a prosthetic leg, the patient said she wanted to be treated at a different hospital if this one only employed retards and cripples."

He pauses for a moment, then adds, "She also used the word, 'woke', I'm not sure what that means."

Lea sucks in a long breath, can feel the anger rising in her chest. Yeah, that sounds like a horrible day for sure. “I’m sorry, Shaun,” she tries to console him. “Some people are just intolerant assholes, you know.”

“Dr. Powell wanted to make a complaint about the patient, but Dr. Wolke advised against it.”

“How did *you* feel about that?”

Shaun shrugs slightly. “I don’t know what that would have accomplished. It is very unlikely that the patient would have changed her attitude, and it wouldn’t have changed her medical treatment. It didn’t matter anyway because she insisted to be assigned different surgeons. She is now being treated by a team of neurotypical, able-bodied physicians.”

“Geez, what a douchebag. But, you know, I think I actually agree with Danica on this. You shouldn’t just take these things on the chin. People need to know that’s out of line and not something you just silently swallow. Besides, she couldn’t be more wrong about you. You’re one of the smartest and best surgeons that St. Bonaventure has to offer, and this patient would have been lucky to have you on her team.”

“That is what Dr. Lim said. Dr. Powell was very angry.”

“And you weren’t?”

He shrugs again. “It is not the first time that has happened.”

God, people are such assholes. It makes the bile rise in Lea’s stomach. “All the more reason to speak up against it,” she says with vigor in her voice.

Shaun visibly tenses next to her. “Now you are angry, too.”

“Yeah, damn right I’m angry. You should *not* be called a retard.”

He stays quiet for a moment, then says, “So… you think I should have made a complaint against the patient?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, maybe. At least voice to your superiors that you were being bullied and discriminated against. I know that options are limited if the complaint is against a patient, but at least Lim or Andrews could have backed you up.”

“Backed me up, how?”

“Spoken to the patient, told them that such behavior wasn’t going to be tolerated or condoned.”

“What could they have done? We cannot refuse giving necessary medical treatment.”

“Oh, I know. I just hate seeing you get bullied without any kind of repercussions.”

Shaun sighs again. “Lea. It’s okay.”

She bristles, turns her body to face him. “You know what, it’s actually *not* okay. I know you basically got bullied your whole life in one way or another for… I don’t know, being different, but that doesn’t make it okay or that you have to tolerate it because you’re used to it.

“You said you didn’t know what ‘woke’ meant. That’s kind of a disparaging word people use when someone is being too preachy about diversity and inclusivity. This isn’t 2010 small town Wyoming, this is the 2020’s and we’re in effin’ California, and there’s nothing woke about wanting those who are different to be treated with respect and dignity.”

It stuns Shaun into silence, and she wonders if she’s maybe going at this a little too strongly. Maybe he doesn’t want her to make a stand for him. Maybe he’s truly gotten to the point where he believes it’s a waste of time and energy to try to educate those that are too narrow-minded to rethink their approach and mindset.

“I’m sorry, Shaun. This already ruined your day, I didn’t wanna contribute more to that.”

He turns his head so he can look at her. “I… like it when you stand up for me, but… I don’t know how we could still change anything about the situation we encountered today.”

She sighs. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But I do want you to know that you don’t have to ever feel ashamed for being different. And I also want you to know that that’s what made me fall in love with you in the first place. And that I still love that about you.”

He looks at her for a long moment. “You once told me you love my brain.”

She smiles. “Your brain is amazing, and your ASD only makes you all the more special. I am very proud to be your wife and to have a sweet and amazing son with you.”

He briefly meets her gaze. “How was he today?”

She shrugs. “Fine. You know, a bit of a chatterbox when I picked him up from daycare. Not sure who he got *that* from.”

“You like talking.”

“Am I talking too much?”

“No,” he says quickly. “You usually talk just the right amount. And when you don’t, I just don’t listen.”

She chuckles. “That’s good to know. You could talk a little more sometimes.”

“I know. You often tell me to ‘use my words’.”

“I do, don’t I? You’ve gotten a lot better at it, though. Just make sure you talk enough to Finn, okay? Teach him some smarty-pants words so he can outrival all of his peers.”

“You want me to teach him medical terminology?”

Lea laughs. “No. Just… some of your, you know, smart words.”

“What are ‘smart words’?”

“I don’t know. Things like ‘foibles’ or ‘recalcitrant’ or ‘extirpate’.”

“Those are very normal words.”

“No, they are words that people with smart brains like yours use, and I want our son to be using smart brain people words.”

“Merriam-Webster has a word-of-the-day feature. I think it has a lot of… ‘smart brain people words’. I will use that to teach these to our son.”

She grins at him. “See, you always have the best ideas. Cause that is definitely a smart brain people idea.”

“You could learn them, too.”

“I could, but I don’t have a smart people brain, so…”

“You have a very smart brain. It is just different smart from mine.”

“Ha, you might be on to something.”

He looks at her for a very long moment and she waits patiently for whatever he wants to say. “Lea?”

“Yes, Shaun?”

“I am very glad that you are feeling better.”

“I am very glad that we’re both feeling better. Cause that virus hitting us both at the same time? That really sucked.”

“It did. Can we have sex tonight?”

She nods. “Yes, Shaun, we very much can. And maybe you can make it up to me a little bit that way.”

A small smile spreads across his lips. “I will try very, very hard.”

“Oh, I have no doubt whatsoever that you will be just fine. That massage you mentioned, on the other hand…”

“I will also try very, very hard to use the refined technique you taught me.”

“And that sounds awesome, and I think we should get started on that right away.”

“Okay,” Shaun easily agrees and is already on the way to the bedroom to get prepared.

She can’t help but smile, thinking that maybe their day will end on a much needed high note after all.