

Feels Like I Can't Compete With

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Feels Like I Can't Compete With

by [Doitwriteaway](#)

Summary

Shaun wants to move forward in his relationship with Lea, but the past keeps getting in the way.

Notes

The title is from the song "Fears" by MTNS.

Lea is an Aspie :) No, seriously, autistic Lea is my headcanon forever and always.

Please read the tags and please take care of yourself, first and foremost. Know that this is a story about processing childhood trauma in the context of a new romantic relationship. This includes the abuse Shaun experienced at the hands of his father as well as the bullying he experienced from other kids, including the incident with Colleen. I've tried to tag for triggers, but please let me know if I should add any additional tags/trigger warnings.

I have attempted to handle the subject matter in this story with care and respect. Although I am a trauma survivor myself, my experiences have not been the same as Shaun's. I apologize if anything feels inaccurate or disrespectfully written and I am open to feedback.

That One Thing

“Oh my *God*,” Lea groaned, dumping her double handful of grocery bags on the floor of the apartment as soon as she crossed the threshold. “That grocery store is terrible. The way that it’s organized makes no sense! We were in there for an hour and a half, Shaun. Honestly, I don’t know how you handle it. I’m never going back there again.”

She pushed the door closed behind her boyfriend, who had entered the apartment shortly afterwards and was poised in the entryway, still loaded down with grocery bags. Then, abandoning the food she’d carried in entirely, she flopped down on the couch, sinking deep into the cushions, legs splayed out in front of her.

Shaun carefully stepped over the dropped groceries and made his way into the small kitchen that, given the open floor plan, felt more like part of the living room than its own separate location. He set down his grocery bags on the table neatly and began rummaging inside of them for the perishables. He always put those away first. It went: refrigerated (spoiled fastest), frozen (because they stayed cold longer than refrigerated goods), non-perishables.

“The groceries there cost less than where you usually shop. I helped you save money,” Shaun replied. “Rivka says that it is the best place to shop on a budget.”

“That explains it,” Lea said. “Your assistant uses her freakish neurotypical powers to navigate that godawful nightmare. We didn’t stand a chance.”

“You bought every item on your list,” Shaun responded, taking a stick of butter out of its box and sliding it onto the butter shelf in the refrigerator door. He put the leftover three sticks into the freezer.

“Yeah, but I have a headache now,” Lea whined. “You’re a doctor. Come fix it for me.”

“These groceries will spoil if we leave them out at room temperature,” Shaun said. “Your headache is likely caused by stress. It will go away on its own.”

“*Alright*,” Lea sighed dramatically, pushing herself up off of the couch and crossing over to the table, “I’ll help you get these put away. I guess that trip will have been a total waste of time and effort if all of the food spoils while I bitch about it on the couch. Sorry,” she added, seeing Shaun flinch, “I know you don’t like that word.”

“I don’t,” Shaun confirmed, noticing with relief that the eggs were in one of his bags and therefore had not endured Lea’s rough treatment. He reached his hands forward to pick up the carton and Lea intercepted them, gently pressing her open palms against Shaun’s.

“Hey,” she said, her tone softer than before, “thank you for going to the grocery store with me. It was really nice to have you come.”

Shaun blushed and pushed his hands against hers affectionately. They lingered there for a moment before she pulled away abruptly and ran to the entryway. "Oh my God, Shaun, I think I dropped the eggs!" she cried.

"You didn't. They are in this bag," Shaun replied, lifting them up to show her before putting them away.

Lea gathered up the grocery bags that she had dropped and brought them over to the table. The two finished putting them away in comfortable silence, and Shaun finished the task by throwing the empty grocery bags away and wiping down the table with all-purpose spray.

"You're neurotic," Lea remarked affectionately, nevertheless crossing to the sink and washing her hands. Then she reached out and ruffled Shaun's hair. His eyes fluttered closed and the smallest smile played at the corners of his lips. "I'm burnt out," she stated, then slipped into a murmur. "Come sit on the couch with me."

Shaun obliged, perching on his usual seat on the far right of the couch, as close to the side as possible without touching it. Leah arranged a pillow on the seat cushion just next to Shaun's lap and lay down, swinging her legs up over the arm of the couch. She reached up and pushed her hair back from under her neck, draping it over Shaun's lap, and settled comfortably into the soft pillows.

Shaun tentatively reached out a hand and pushed his fingers through Lea's hair, as though a part of him still did not believe he was allowed to do this. A satisfied smile spread across her face in response, and she closed her eyes. Emboldened, Shaun began to play with her hair with more confident fingers, twisting strands around his fingers before pulling his hand through and letting go. Once he was able to relax, it was easy to lose himself in the sensation. Lea had recently colored her hair, wine red streaks now adorning her natural dark brown hue. In the shadow, they almost blended in, but where the lamplight hit them they glowed. Shaun's hands manipulated patterns of shifting color in Lea's hair.

"Mmm, I'm glad you're into the color," Lea said.

"It's nice," Shaun responded softly. "And your hair is very soft."

"Deep conditioner," she replied. "It comes with the dye -- it's supposed to heal any damage that happened from coloring it. But I can get a bottle at the drugstore."

"You're beautiful, Lea," Shaun said. Then he continued to comb his hands through her hair.

They relaxed this way in comfortable silence for several minutes. Then, abruptly, Lea made a noise somewhere between a gasp and a moan. Shaun startled. "It's *really* good when you sort of pull on it," she said, by way of explanation. Something electric and unstable surged in Shaun's stomach. He tugged harder with each pass through of his fingers.

The observable rate of the rise and fall of her chest increased. Thoughts that Shaun usually barred from entering his consciousness pushed themselves into his mind. Lea becoming aroused and impatient with him. Lea getting up and pulling him down on the couch

underneath her. Expert fingers drifting down his body as she undid every button. Pushy, insistent hands palming his crotch before undoing that button too and pulling his pants down to his knees and -- Shaun's breath hitched as he tamped down the fantasy with the familiar inner mantra of *stopstopstopstopstop*. The prickle in his stomach acidified.

Meanwhile, Lea stretched languidly, and Shaun pulled his hands back momentarily as she brought her arms back over her head, her back arcing and her t-shirt riding up, exposing a strip of her stomach. Then she relaxed again, her hands now resting in Shaun's lap. After she settled, Shaun hesitated for just a moment before experimentally gathering all of her hair into a ponytail in his hand, twisting it around itself several times firmly before letting it go. Lea's whole body tightened, muscles clenching, and then released.

Slowly, one of her hands that had been resting innocuously in Shaun's lap curled against his inner thigh. Her fingers lightly traced back and forth, back and forth. Shaun's mouth was entirely dry and he was entirely hard. He imagined her hand moving higher and higher with agonizing slowness until he was close to begging wordlessly, and then she'd acquiesce, finally she would -- *stopstopstopstopSTOP*. A cold sweat broke out all over Shaun. He fumbled to get his hand to listen to his brain properly, eventually able to slam his hand down against hers and still her touch.

Lea froze, her fingers curling into a loose fist underneath Shaun's hand. Slowly, she withdrew her hand and rested it on her stomach. "Shaun..." she murmured.

"I don't want to go any further," he said, the words rehearsed from a list of phrases Rivka had written down on a sheet of printer paper, practiced over the course of many afternoons in front of the bathroom mirror. His gaze remained steadfastly fixed on the wall across from them, above and behind the television. His spine was rigid, his body motionless, save for his hands which came together to tangle in his lap.

"We won't," Lea assured him, her voice almost a whisper. She withdrew her other arm off of his lap and hugged herself tightly. When Shaun did not respond, she added, "I'm sorry." She craned her neck back and looked up at his face. He stared at the wall.

Lea turned onto her side, facing the back of the couch, and drew her knees up to her chest. She butted her head gently against Shaun's thigh. He made no response, did not reach out and touch her hair in a familiar gesture of comfort or even flinch away. She pulled back again and curled in on herself.

Shaun's normally soft gaze had taken on an icy, glassy quality, like he was looking at the world through a one way mirror, on the side where Lea couldn't see him. Quashing her own feelings of upset, because Shaun was clearly struggling, Lea gathered some momentum and rolled herself off of the couch. She landed on her feet and made her way to the kitchen sink, filling a glass of water. She was disturbed to find that it almost felt like a ritual and she wondered for the umpteenth time how she managed to keep doing this. Breathing deeply in a forced, practiced manner, she brought the glass over to Shaun and waited in front of him until he took it with both hands and sipped slowly.

Shaun felt like the water was waking up his body again, dragging him back to himself like he was being dragged out of bed. He blinked up at Lea hazily.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, her eyes on the tips of her sneakers.

Shaun scoffed, that harsh little humourless laugh, and said, "Why are you sorry?"

"Because," she said miserably, "I made you uncomfortable. I keep making you uncomfortable."

"It isn't your fault," Shaun insisted. "I encourage you to touch me."

"Yeah," Lea pressed, "but it's my job to figure out the ways you want to be touched, and the ways you don't. This isn't like an all or nothing thing, Shaun."

"I liked being touched that way," Shaun replied thoughtfully. "Then I didn't. So I told you to stop. You stopped. Your behavior was appropriate."

Lea sighed heavily. "So what do we do now?" she asked.

In response, Shaun picked up the remote from the coffee table and turned on the TV. The sounds of an infomercial blared from the speakers, and Lea and Shaun both jumped slightly in unison. But Shaun made no move to lower the volume.

Lea lowered herself gingerly onto the couch.

"FOR JUST SIX PAYMENTS OF 19.99!" said the man on the screen.

"That's, like, over a hundred dollars," Lea remarked sourly.

"119 dollars and 94 cents," Shaun responded, without missing a beat.

"I probably would have been able to calculate that if I could actually hear myself think," she replied, a touch of irritation creeping into her tone. "Turn that down."

Shaun complied. "I thought you said that you were sensory seeking," he said. "That is the reason you listen to your music so loudly."

"Yeah, but it's not like I spend my time stimming to tupperware commercials!" she snapped. Then she softened. "Not like there's anything wrong with that..." she said softly.

"Now you are angry," Shaun remarked.

"I'm *not* angry," said Lea, gritting her teeth. "I'm just worn out."

"When you are angry, your tone of voice gets louder, just like this. You're angry. Did I do something to make you angry?"

"No! You did not do anything, Shaun!" Lea exclaimed, her voice rising again.

"Are you angry because you wanted to have sex with me and I wouldn't have sex with you?" he asked.

“No!” she cried, clenching and unclenching her fists. “That is an unfair accusation! I’m angry because I have no clue what the hell is going on!”

“I don’t understand,” said Shaun, twisting his fingers together.

“Like, the freezing up! The glassy expression! When this happens, it’s like you’re not even there anymore...” Suddenly, her whole body froze. When she spoke again, there wasn’t any anger in her tone. “Wait. Did something... has something ever happened to you? Like...” she trailed off, unable to articulate what she meant.

“Nothing has happened to me!” Shaun yelled. The force of it shocked them both into a momentary silence, before he pushed himself off the couch and ran out the door.

Lea made no move to follow after him. She sat, in stunned silence, and chewed on the edge of her t-shirt. Finally, she reached over for the remote and turned off the TV. Then she crumpled in on herself, lying down again with her knees tucked up against her chest, blinking back tears.

Meanwhile, back in his own apartment, Shaun was pacing. If he just kept moving, sometimes that would keep that feeling from settling into him, feeling like it was filling him up. It felt like being touched when he didn’t want to be touched, but there was no one touching him and no way to make it stop. He slammed his fists against his forehead and tried to keep track of his breathing as it struggled to slip from his control. *Nothing has happened to you. Nothing has happened to you.* He repeated the words in his mind like a mantra.

Finally, the feeling began to abate, and his breathing began to slow and become more manageable. He dropped down to sit on his bed, crossed his legs, and observed the way his hands shook as they rested against his knees. *Nothing has happened to you*, he repeated again. But another small voice in the back of his mind said, *If that’s true, when Lea spoke, why could you only think of that one thing?*

Friendly Conversation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shaun adjusted his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose and scrutinized the chessboard in front of him. He reached out his hand and hovered it over the pieces, his eyes darting around the board.

“Oh my God, this isn’t the World Chess Championship!” Jared exclaimed, seated on top of the picnic table next to the board. “Just pick a move.”

“Hush, let him finish,” Claire admonished, staring at the pieces before them and then glancing up at Shaun’s face, trying to read his next move. His expression was unintelligible.

Finally, he moved his bishop several spaces on the diagonal. “Check,” he said primly, settling his hands back into his lap.

“Damn it,” Claire cursed, “I thought you were going to miss that.” She turned her attention back to her own pieces, quickly determining the most effective move to put herself out of danger. She moved her king a single space to the right. Then she looked up at Shaun and arched her eyebrow. “Un-check,” she replied, tossing her hair behind her shoulder.

Shaun began his lengthy process of assessing the board once again. Thirty seconds passed before Jared groaned in frustration, dragging his hands through his hair. Unfazed, Shaun’s attention to the board did not waver.

“Jared,” Claire said, rolling her eyes, “we played rocks-paper-scissors, *at your request*, to determine the order of our turns. You’ll get to play the winner soon enough. Now drink your smoothie, and stop with the histrionics!”

“My smoothie is gone,” Jared complained.

Shaun hovered his hand over the board again, moving from piece to piece. This went on for another thirty seconds before Jared lost his patience again. “Shaun, you have one good move, and it’ll put Claire in check again! I know you see it. Why don’t you just take it?”

“Hey!” Claire cried. “Don’t help him!”

“I just want one of you to go ahead and lose already, and judging by the looks of this board, that’s probably going to be you,” Jared retorted.

“You are the worst boyfriend!” Claire huffed, but she was smiling.

“I have to run every move before I decide which is best,” Shaun responded, leaning over the pieces.

“Every move!” Jared exclaimed. “You mean every possible move, for every single one of your pieces? The best move here is obvious, Shaun!”

“I have to be thorough,” Shaun replied. “I have to check every move so that I don’t make a mistake.”

“No one plays like this, Shaun! At least not for fun,” Jared grumbled.

“Well, he is winning,” Claire pointed out.

After another moment’s pause, Shaun moved a rook two spaces over. “Check,” he said again.

Like Jared, Claire had anticipated this move. She quickly moved her king over another space, out of harm’s way. Then she smiled at Shaun before glancing up at Jared. “I’m not dead yet,” she said.

Shaun began his lengthy process of calculation again. Jared scrubbed his hands over his face and heaved another sigh.

“Here, do you want to finish my smoothie?” Claire asked, passing Jared the plastic cup. Beads of condensation dripped off of it under the hot midday sun.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting the drink gratefully and taking a sip. His face twisted, and he swallowed loudly. “What the hell is this?” he asked indignantly. “You said this was a smoothie.”

“It is a smoothie,” Claire replied. “Just... a healthy one.”

“It’s absolutely terrible,” Jared stated. “It tastes like guacamole.”

“You like guacamole,” Claire responded.

“I don’t chill it and drink it, though,” Jared pointed out.

“Check,” Shaun announced, sitting back on the bench again. Claire and Jared both looked over to assess his move.

“Hm,” Claire nodded, feigning an impressed expression, before knocking out the piece he’d just moved with one of her own.

“I didn’t see that,” Shaun protested.

“I know,” Claire replied smugly.

“You and Jared were arguing. It broke my concentration,” Shaun complained, beginning to stim by twisting his fingers together.

“What? No we didn’t!” Claire responded defensively.

“Okay,” Jared interjected, “let’s all just remain calm, and try to enjoy some of our meager time off with friendly conversation and a board game. It’s just a board game, that’s all it is.”

“Says the guy who’s been stirring up drama since the moment we sat down!” Claire protested. Then she gathered her composure and took a deep breath. “It’s your move, Shaun,” she said. Then she smiled, and added, “In the spirit of friendly conversation, I like your sunglasses.”

Shaun reached up again and adjusted the large, round tortoise-shell plastic frames on the bridge of his nose. “Thank you,” he replied, before attempting to turn his focus back to the chess pieces.

“You know, I think those are women’s sunglasses, Shaun,” Jared smirked.

Claire batted at him with her hand. “Why can’t you just be nice?” she asked, a touch of genuine annoyance in her tone. “*I* think they’re fashionable. You could pull off anything, Shaun.”

“These sunglasses effectively block sunlight due to their size and shape. They are not women’s sunglasses. They are my sunglasses,” Shaun replied smoothly. He paused for a moment, then added, “Your socks are mismatched, Jared.”

Jared glanced down at his feet. “Touche,” he replied. Claire laughed. Jared took another sip of the green smoothie as Shaun ritualistically hovered his hand over his chess pieces like the claw machine at an arcade.

“You know, this smoothie really grows on you,” Jared remarked, setting down the cup on the table between himself and the chess board.

“It does?” Claire asked, interest piqued. She reached over and picked it up again.

“No, it really doesn’t. Would you like to try it again?” Jared asked with a cheeky grin.

“You asshole!” Claire cried.

Shaun glanced between them with a mildly worried expression. “Is this affectionate teasing, or aggressive teasing?” he asked.

“Affectionate,” they both assured him at the same time. Jared reached over and took Claire’s hand, squeezing it gently before letting it go again.

Shaun made his move. “It’s your turn, Claire,” he said.

Claire picked up a bishop and then paused, judging the distance that she wanted to move it.

Shaun twisted his hands together again, and rocked slightly back and forth. “In the spirit of friendly conversation, Lea wants to have sex with me,” he remarked.

Claire dropped the bishop and it skittered across the board before rolling down the table. She looked up at Shaun, her eyes wide, her mouth slightly open. Jared sputtered and coughed on a mouthful of smoothie.

Claire composed herself first. “Wow, that’s a big step in any relationship,” she said.

“Really?” Jared gasped, when he could finally breathe normally again.

“Why would that be unusual?” Claire asked pointedly, elbowing him. “They *have* been in a relationship for a couple of months.”

Jared nodded, as though processing this unexpected turn of events, before breaking into a grin. “Well, get it, Shaun!” he crowed.

“So,” Claire asked, quirking her eyebrow suggestively at Shaun, “what do *you* think about that?”

“I don’t know,” Shaun replied, his voice wavering.

Claire and Jared both sobered instantly.

“Well, that’s okay,” Claire offered.

“Listen,” Jared said seriously. “It’s okay not to want to have sex.”

“I know,” Shaun responded, looking down at the board.

“No, seriously,” Jared continued, “People think, because you’re a guy, that you have to somehow always want it. But that isn’t true. It doesn’t matter your reasoning, it’s fine if you’re not in the mood to have sex.”

“That is good advice,” Shaun said. “Thank you.” Then he paused. “I do want it,” he admitted softly.

“Oh,” Claire said, raising her eyebrows and smiling. Jared blushed. Claire continued, “Then... go for it. There’s nothing stopping you.”

Shaun let out a huff of exasperation, and began rocking slightly more forcefully. “I do want it, and then it starts to happen and I don’t anymore. It’s confusing. And it upsets Lea.”

Claire nodded sympathetically. “That sounds really stressful,” she said.

Jared leaned back on his hands, squinting up at the sunlight. “My advice would be, just do everything really slowly. There’s no need to rush.”

Claire added, “And do everything on your terms. Have you talked to Lea about this at all?”

“She asked me about it,” Shaun said, “and I got angry at the way she asked. I ran away.”

“Well, you should go talk to her about it, then,” Claire said, decisively. She waited for Shaun’s response, but he made none, silently stimming with his hands. After a moment, she added encouragingly, “Just clear the air. I’m sure if you just tell her how you’re feeling, it will all work out.” She picked up the bishop again, and stared at the board, her brow furrowed. “Now, I just need to remember where this came from...”

Shaun moved to point to the location on the board, but Jared intercepted his hands with lightning speed, gently catching them and holding them still. “Can we just call it good? I’m starving,” he declared.

Shaun pulled his hands away from Jared sharply. “We haven’t finished the game yet,” he pointed out.

“You could finish this painfully drawn out game of chess... or you could be finishing a plate of pancakes,” Jared proposed.

Shaun cocked his head to the side and considered it for a moment. “I’d prefer the pancakes,” he decided.

Jared turned to Claire. “What do you say, Claire?”

“Alright,” she said, smiling. “I’m down to get something to eat.”

Jared hopped down from the table and extended his hand to Claire, helping her up from the bench. They gathered together the trash from their drinks and headed over to a nearby garbage can.

Shaun picked up the box for the chess set from the seat next to him and placed it on the table, neatly organizing the pieces inside. Then he put the lid on the box and stood up. His friends were standing some distance away. Shaun watched as Claire dropped Jared’s and Shaun’s empty cups into the garbage. As he continued to observe, Jared dramatically raised Claire’s leftover green smoothie up to the sky, said something that caused Claire to double over in laughter, and then dropped it from high up into the trash.

Claire and Jared were a couple that had, as Lea would say, “been through some shit.” From what Claire had told him, Shaun knew that she and Jared had initially had very different priorities in their relationship. Their troubles had come to a boiling point when Coyle assaulted Claire and then Jared assaulted Coyle, and Jared had lost his job. But they had stayed in contact afterwards, and both had worked to rebuild their relationship.

Claire wrapped her arms around Jared, pulling him into a hug, and he reciprocated. Then they turned and started to walk back towards Shaun. Shaun bit the inside of his lip thoughtfully. If he trusted anyone to give him advice for relationship success, it would be these two. Now he just had to figure out exactly what it was that he was feeling, understand it in a way that he could put it into words.

Claire and Jared walked up to Shaun. “Ready, Shaun?” Claire asked cheerfully.

“I... don’t know,” Shaun said, fiddling with the cuff of his shirtsleeve and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“For pancakes,” Jared clarified.

“Oh, yes,” Shaun said, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. Thankfully, it seemed that some questions still had easy answers.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to those who left me such kind comments on chapter one! I am going to try to reply to each individually but I'm woefully low on spoons.

I'm completely wiped out, but I wanted to see if I could get another chapter up, so here it is.

Please give me any feedback - all of it is greatly appreciated!

Thank you for reading :)

A Basic Physical Reaction

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER/CONTENT WARNING:

Masturbation, trauma, PTSD, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, recollection of past physical abuse. If any of this sounds like it's not a good idea right now, please skip this chapter. There isn't anything plot-related that you will miss. I wrote this chapter as an exploration of Shaun's anxiety and the way that trauma is impacting his feelings about sex. It was a hard chapter to write. I hope that it contributes to this story in a way that feels right. Take care of yourselves, and thanks for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Plink. Plink. Plink.

The steady drip of the faucet filled the dark, quiet apartment with its soft rhythm. Even so, it did not drown out the sound of Shaun's breathing.

Shallow breath in. Shallow breath out. Shallow like the dip of a seashell.

He stared at the layers of shadow coalescing on the ceiling and tried to stop listening to his breathing. Most nights, the sensory gating mechanism in his brain functioned such that the sound of the faucet, the loudest sound, filled out the silence and took care of everything else. Some nights, it didn't, and every other little noise crowded for space. Especially his breathing.

Breathing sounded like waiting. Waiting for the phantom slam of a front door from fifteen years ago, and then the crisp, clear back-and-forth of voices through the thin walls.

The creak of his mother getting up from the table to intercept his father at the door. *"Hey, how was your day, Jack?"*

The too-even response: *"Was Shaun sent home from school early again today?"*

The barely-skipped beat. *"No, Shaun had a great day at school today. He took the bus home with Steve."*

"Lying bitch." A slap. *"The school called me at work today. Apparently you weren't picking up."*

"I'm sorry, Jack, I was in the shower--"

"Apparently he had another one of his little fits again. They said he was hitting his head against the wall. I don't know how much longer you're going to tolerate this behavior"

from him."

"Jack, Shaun is... different. He's special. He needs more help than other kids. Maybe if you were just a little--"

A harsh, humorless laugh. *"Jesus, Mary, you act like he's retarded. Clearly he has something going on upstairs, if the rate that he blows through library books is any indication. The thud of a stack of books knocked off the table and onto the floor. He just wants attention. But it's time he gets his act together. I'll deal with him now, as clearly you won't."*

StopstopstopstopSTOP. Shaun clenched his fists in his sheets and squeezed his eyes shut hard, until bright circles danced in front of his vision. He had to think of something else. Had to be disciplined and deliberate if he wanted to get enough sleep to function tomorrow.

Step one. He thought of the day's caseload at the hospital. It had been a slow, uneventful day, and though it brought him satisfaction to think of the help he'd been to the lengthy list of patients he'd seen (ear infection, norovirus, three cases of strep throat, laceration from paring knife, heatstroke, two cases of flu), the near-effortless process of diagnosis, IV fluids, antibiotics, stitches did little to focus and hold his attention. Work wasn't good enough.

He decided to try another tactic. Sometimes, he could transform the waiting feeling into something positive by mentally redirecting it, imagining that he was waiting for something pleasant or comforting. Instantly, he thought of Lea. He pictured her insistent way of knocking at the door until she was invited in, her sleepy, smiling face, her most adorable matching pyjamas. He imagined her walking over to him as he lay in the middle of the room and gently settling down next to him on the mattress. He could almost feel the warmth of her presence next to him, the comforting weight of her arm draped across his stomach, the steady susurrus of her warm breath against his neck.

His shallow breaths came slower, deeper. Dream-Lea felt realer the closer he came to sleep. Now he could feel the gentle pressure of her lips against his neck, a line of slow, wet kisses trailing up towards his ear, and then the firm, pleasurable little pain of her teeth briefly closing around his earlobe. The hand that had been resting over his stomach came up to tangle in his hair. His pillow suddenly smelled of lavender. He turned over, onto his side, to kiss her. He met nothing. Empty air. He was fully awake again.

His breaths were now shorter and quicker and louder, and harder to ignore than before. Shaun turned onto his stomach and buried his face in his pillow in frustration. Imagining Lea had been entirely counterproductive. They had only seen each other once since Shaun had run out of her apartment, a quick visit for an apology and a chaste kiss before Lea was off to work. A band-aid kind of visit. Shaun knew they hadn't really addressed the issue that was causing them stress. However, days passed and Lea worked long hours at the office, struggling to meet the deadline for a major project. There hadn't been time to discuss it.

So not only was Shaun still worried about the Big Conversation looming on the horizon, he was also desperately missing her. It seemed that there was now a part of him that

subsisted on her laugh, her smile, her reckless driving, her terrible music. And also. The way that she touched him, the way that it felt to touch her.

A flash of heat sparked somewhere near his chest and passed through his body like a wave. That was interesting. Potentially useful. He shut his eyes and focused in on his fantasy. In his own bed, in the dark, he might just be able to keep a handle on it.

Kitchen. Lea sitting on the countertop. Standing in front of her. Her lips against his, soft, warm. His hands cupping the sides of her face. Hers wrapped around his back. Pulling each other closer and closer together. Kisses becoming sloppier. Drowning in the smell of her. Hands under her shirt, skating up her back, hot skin, the typography of her spine. The clasp of her bra; undoing it. Her gasp into his mouth, twisting handfuls of his shirt in her hands, her knees on either side of his body. Hands slipping underneath her bra, cupping her breasts, thumbs dragging over her nipples. Her excited fumbling with her shirt and then off, smooth bare skin and body wash and deodorant and laundry detergent and sweat and Lea Lea Lea. Kissing her collarbone, digging his teeth in just underneath because of the noise she made in response, one he'd only heard once before and replicated in every fantasy since. "Shaun," (guiding his hand downward) "I want you to--"

Sharp breath in. Sharp like the tip of a tack. *Door slamming. The sound of a slap.* Shaun belly-flopped down off of his arousal and reverberated with the shock of it. He clenched his fists, turned over onto his back again. The leftover tickle of arousal gone rancid swirled in his gut.

Sighing, Shaun got up from his bed, kicking the sheets onto the floor, and retrieved his laptop and headphones from inside his dresser drawer. He took these items back into bed and powered on his computer, wringing his hands as he waited for it to boot up. Once he got a browser window open it didn't take long to find something that would suffice. Amateur, a fairly attractive woman and a very attractive man, and despite the intimidating description Shaun gathered that it was likely to be reassuringly vanilla. It wasn't nearly as impactful as the kitchen counter sex fantasy, but nothing about it reminded him of himself, and that was largely what counted the most.

He pushed his earbuds into his ears and sat up in bed with his legs stretched out, his computer resting between his knees. He pressed play on the video and watched, hands clasped together in his lap, the sheet pulled up to his waist, waiting to feel something other than disgust at himself.

On his screen, a young woman with shoulder-length blonde hair settled down on her back on the bed. She was wearing a tight, lacy black bra, and her breasts spilled over the cups. Shaun frowned slightly, squinting to get a closer look with almost clinical fascination. It looked too tight; it looked uncomfortable. His mind flashed back to watching a television show with Lea late one night. He was half asleep, just come back from a long shift. "You see? This is what I hate," she'd said, around a mouthful of sugary cereal. Shaun had blinked at the screen blearily, confused. "They couldn't even get her a properly fitted bra for this scene! Observe, Shaun. She's spilling out of the top and the sides. Ill fitting lingerie is one of my biggest pet peeves," she concluded. Shaun had been too tired to respond, his eyes

blinking shut. Lea had petted his hair. No, she definitely would not approve of the fit of this bra.

The woman in the video let out a moan, and oh, Shaun hadn't noticed, but now the man was kissing her, he'd completely missed when that started, and maybe he should just give up and cut his losses, but the man was really quite good looking. Shaun just couldn't unsee the fact that the woman's bra didn't fit right; it nagged at him. He was about to x out of the tab, somewhat regretfully, when the man reached underneath the woman's arched back and undid her bra, tossing it onto the floor. So that was done.

Shaun squeezed his eyes shut, sipping air through his nose quietly, quietly. Then he opened his eyes again, observing as the couple on screen clumsily caressed each others' upper bodies. He would try again. He gave himself a mental pep talk. If he could do this, he would be able to fall asleep, easily. He could successfully complete complicated, hours long surgeries; there was no reason he shouldn't be able to elicit a basic physical reaction from himself. The woman made a high, gasping sound that actually seemed somewhat genuine, and that little spark flared inside Shaun again. He pressed the earbuds deeper into his ears and watched.

Now the man was fingering her. He had very large, very strong-looking hands. Judging by the responses of his partner, he knew how to use them. Shaun's face colored. Finally, he could feel himself responding.

Slow sips of air. Like he was rationing it.

To start with this feeling was always entirely his body's, heartbeat speeding up sweating starting to get hard and breathing breathing breathing, but Shaun worked hard to trap it somewhere inside his mind. If he tried, Shaun could separate this place from most of himself. This was okay: this feeling, this reaction, wasn't attached to Shaun at all, it was entirely a product of the sex act happening on the screen. It belonged to these two strangers; Shaun had nothing to do with it.

The woman came; her hands curled into fists and she stiffened and trembled and didn't make any noise save for a bright little "Ah!" right near the top of her vocal register. Shaun started to masturbate through his pajama pants, but in his mind there was no movement involved; this feeling was static and pure, pleasure divorced from touch, sensation without anything living attached. In the back of his mind, underneath waves of pleasure, a thought intruded: nobody seemed to talk about how much of masturbation was simply forgetting--forgetting the past, forgetting the present, forgetting identity. Maybe there was something wrong with Shaun. He shut down the thought and focused intently on the screen.

The two individuals were now having intercourse. The man was on top of the woman, and his weight was probably pinning her to the bed, she probably couldn't get up, but that was okay, because these were just two fine, normal people who enjoyed getting off together and had absolutely no hang ups about the sound of their own breathing. Shaun focused on the man, focused on the movement of the muscles in his back as he thrust in and out, and god wouldn't he just like to drag his tongue across the skin there and taste his sweat and panic closing in *nonononono* this wasn't about Shaun, he wasn't involved, he wasn't even watching, not really, not fully, there was pleasure but it was and wasn't his at the same time.

Distraction averted disaster when the man put two fingers in his partner's mouth and she began to suck, that was unexpected, and clearly this pushed them both closer and closer to another climax, and meanwhile somewhere in hypothetical space this feeling was building and building. Finally, the point of no return was reached. It was beyond Shaun's control at this point; he was going to cum. This was okay, this was more than okay, this felt really, really good, and it was so good that it overwhelmed Shaun's shame and embarrassment and fear. He continued to watch the screen through half lidded eyes, mesmerized by the rhythm, steady and reassuring, and the man reached up and put his hand around his partner's neck--

The man reached up and put his hand around his partner's neck.

Shaun's body broke out in sweat like he had the flu and he inhaled sharply, loudly, desperately, like he did after

A flood of light. The creak of the bedroom door. "Get up, Shaun. Get out of bed."

Shaun didn't move, frozen in place.

"I said get up, Shaun. Don't you dare pretend you don't understand me."

"Jack, please, let it be. It's a school night. I'll talk to him tomorrow, first thing, I promise."

"Listen to me, Shaun! Get up!" His voice was getting louder. Shaun wanted to move but he couldn't.

Footsteps approaching. His heart beating. His breaths fluttering like a pinwheel in a weak breeze.

"Shaun..." That was his warning shot.

He couldn't move.

"God, I can't stand you."

I know.

"I never signed up for this."

I know.

"I think we'd all be better off if you had never been born."

I know.

Hands around his throat. He couldn't move. He couldn't breath. He was choking. His chest burned. Tears beaded in the corners of his eyes. He thought, not for the first time and not for the last: I am going to die.

"Jack! Jack, stop! Oh my God. Oh my God. You're going to kill him!"

A dark blue dark closed in. I am not ready.

“Jack!” His mother pulled on his father’s arm and struggled against his father’s strength. It wasn’t enough. She met Shaun’s eyes and screamed. She grabbed his father’s hair with both hands and pulled back, hard. He let go of Shaun and fell back. He took hold of Shaun’s mother and dragged her out the door, slamming it behind him.

Shaun gasped for air.

Shaun gasped for air, and because he was close, and because he was shocked, he came.

For a while, he just sat there, breathing raggedly, sticky and drenched in cold sweat. Then with slow, shaky movements, he reached out with his clean hand and closed out of the tab, cleared his browser history, and shut down his laptop. He set it carefully on the floor, got up, and stood for a moment beside his bed, looking down at his crumpled sheets, overcome briefly with vertigo. Then he stripped the bed, dumped the sheets in his hamper in his closet, stumbled to the bathroom, and carefully extracted himself from his pajamas. Avoiding the mirror, he took out a bottle of Benadryl tablets from the first drawer underneath the sink. He placed two of them on his tongue and tried to swallow them dry, but his gummed-up mouth and throat didn’t cooperate. So he held them in his mouth and ran the shower. He waited by the shower for a long time as the water heated up, the pills bleeding bitterness into him. Finally he stepped underneath the stream of water and drew the shower curtain closed behind him. It was dark in the shower. The light bulb outside in the bathroom worked but the one inside the shower was burnt out. He opened his mouth and water sluiced inside, washing the remnants of the Benadryl down his throat.

Comfortable exhaustion closed in. He couldn’t hear anything under the roar of the shower. Couldn’t feel anything under the pounding of the water on his skin. The water didn’t feel too hot but his skin was turning red; there was enough light that he could see as much as that. He had to be careful not to fall asleep in here. If he did he could really hurt himself. (It might be so nice so nice to fall asleep in here.) His eyelids grew heavy. He waited underneath the shower to feel clean again but tonight, the feeling wasn’t going to come.

He turned off the water. Stepped out of the shower onto the cold tile. (Cold was easier to feel than hot.) Stood dripping under the electric light, immobile. When he started to shiver, he dried himself the rest of the way with his towel from yesterday morning that was hanging on the hook. Closet, clothes. Drawer, sheets. Bed.

Safe dark. Soft shadows. The smell of his pillow.

Fuzzy noise from the tap. *Plink. Plink. Plink.*

Thank you so much for reading. And thank you, thank you, to everyone who has written kind and encouraging comments. Your feedback and support means everything to me. Definitely lighter content ahead. Also please comment if there's any particular thing you'd want to see happen with this story. I have an outline but it's a very loose outline and subject to change!

Trust

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shaun carefully ladled lukewarm stew out of the large pot that sat on top of the stove and into a tupperware container. Once he'd filled it nearly to the top, he pushed it down the counter towards his assistant, Rivka. She sealed the lid on top and then placed a piece of masking tape over it, labeling it "Tuesday" with handwriting that was almost as meticulous as Shaun's. They continued their conveyor belt operation in this way until they had seven separate tupperware containers filled with stew, one for each day of the week. Then they both stepped back from the counter in unison.

"Well, there's your dinner for the week," Rivka remarked, pushing her large horn-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Shaun nodded, stacking the containers and bringing them over to the refrigerator. He put two of them in the fridge and the rest in the freezer. Meanwhile, Rivka began cleaning up the kitchen, bringing the empty pot over to the sink and beginning to scrub it out with dish soap and a sponge.

Shaun closed the refrigerator and then stood back. He observed Rivka as she washed out the dish, waiting impatiently so that he could wash his hands. He still felt somewhat awkward around her on occasions such as this, when she ended up doing something that he easily could have done himself. It reminded him of the unfamiliar position she occupied in his life.

It was surprisingly easy to forget that he had an aide. Partly, this was because she didn't look or talk the way Shaun expected an aide to look or talk before he'd begun the process of looking to hire one. She certainly didn't look like the other aides that Doctor Glassman had helped him interview. She looked like she might have been one of Lea's friends, 26 years old with short, dark curly hair that was buzzed on the sides and a silver nose ring in her nose, and she wore oversized chunky sweaters that hung loosely off her skinny, petite frame. In a moment of levity, when Shaun had commented on her sartorial choices, she'd jokingly referred to her look as "the lesbian librarian aesthetic."

Mostly, though, the reason he so often forgot that Rivka was his aide was because she didn't act like he'd feared an aide would act. It was this fear, fortunately misplaced, that had caused him to avoid hiring someone to help him for so long. His pre-Rivka archetype was a loosely-based composite of the special education teacher from his second middle school and the most overbearing set of foster parents he'd had the misfortune of living with, someone who nitpicked the way he held his body and how he spoke, micromanaged his time and what he ate, and forced him to socialize "appropriately." Rivka did none of those things. In fact, she was so helpful, so unobtrusive, and such a good listener that Shaun had quickly decided that he'd rather refer to her as his assistant than his aide.

Unfortunately, however, there were still times that it nagged uncomfortably at Shaun that there was a person in his life he paid to help him do things that most adults could do on their own. Like now, as Shaun stood in the middle of his kitchen, feeling out of place, as Rivka washed a dish. Never mind that, as Doctor Glassman pointed out, most adults paid Shaun to do something that they couldn't every single day, perform surgeries that were a matter of life and death.

Empathetic to the point of uncanniness, Rivka turned abruptly to Shaun, resting the metal pot in the bottom of the sink. "I can let you handle this," she said over the sound of running water.

"Okay," said Shaun, sidling over to take her place at the sink.

Inevitably, because he had been thinking about Rivka's place in his life, he thought of Lea. It was Lea who had finally convinced him to seek some assistance in his day-to-day life. Not that she'd suggested to him that he hire an aide. She'd never brought it up. But gradually, as Lea and Shaun's lives became closer, Lea had started helping Shaun with things. At first, they were little things here and there. She invited him over and cooked him dinner when she noticed he was running low on food in his refrigerator. She drove him to work when Shaun had an important meeting with Doctor Andrews early in the morning that he could absolutely not be late for. But gradually, the little things accumulated. She started driving him everywhere that he used to arrive late, including work. She kept track of the food he had in his apartment and whether he was eating. She went with him to places that typically overwhelmed him, even though many of them overwhelmed her as well. And it was so comfortable, so liberating, to finally be on time, to feel well-fed, to minimize the time he spent curled up in his bed with his blankets pulled over his spinning head, that he hardly noticed that she was providing him with more assistance than he'd ever felt comfortable receiving before. But when Lea suggested one afternoon that she might be able to help him set up and keep track of a day planner, Shaun panicked. He wanted Lea to be his partner, not his caretaker, and with the amount of time they spent together simply dealing with the nuts and bolts of Shaun's life, their relationship felt off balance.

Hence, Rivka. She drove him to and from work, assisted him with meal planning and prep, accompanied him on errands, and helped him keep track of a day planner that he kept on his phone. Work was his domain, and he did that on his own. And he still spent most of his time outside of work alone, with friends, or with Lea. Well. The balance of his time had shifted dramatically in the two weeks since his and Lea's fight. Now, he didn't spend time with Lea anymore.

Shaun was startled out of his thoughts by a loud knocking on his door. Whoever it was knocked for far longer and far more insistently than Shaun understood to be considered polite, and his stomach lurched with dread as he hurriedly rinsed his hands and shut off the sink. He made eye contact with Rivka, who no doubt took in his frozen, anxious expression.

"One of us could get the door," she whispered.

"No. No, no, no," Shaun said softly.

"I'm guessing that's Lea," she said.

“I know,” Shaun responded. “I’m waiting for her to go away.”

Finally, the knocking stopped. Shaun exhaled softly in relief, then turned back to rinsing the pot in the sink.

“I’m confused as to why you’re avoiding Lea,” Rivka said carefully, turning her chair towards Shaun. “You don’t have to tell me anything you aren’t comfortable with, but this seems like a pretty significant change.”

“Lea wants to have sex with me, and I don’t want to talk about it,” Shaun replied.

Rivka didn’t ever look taken aback in the way that other people did. Instead, when faced with a surprising interaction, she grew very quiet and thoughtful, chewing her lip before replying.

“I can imagine how that would be creating some conflict,” she said finally.

Shaun didn’t respond, drying the pot with a dish towel and putting it away in a cabinet.

“So, scheduling for next week,” Rivka said. “Trips, appointments, assistance!”

“My schedule next week is the same as it usually is,” Shaun replied. “I don’t have anything unusual planned.”

“Alright,” Rivka said. “I guess I should be on my way then.”

“Okay,” Shaun said softly, standing once again in the middle of his kitchen.

“And Shaun,” Rivka added, as she got up from the table, “I’m happy to listen to you any time you want to talk about things.”

Shaun was silent for a moment, standing perfectly still except for the movement of his hands, clasped together in front of him, fingers lacing and unlacing. Finally, he spoke. “Is it normal to be afraid of sex?” he asked.

Rivka halted. There was a long moment of silence during which Shaun began to worry that Rivka wouldn’t answer him at all. “I’m not a therapist, so I can’t answer definitively about what is or isn’t normal,” she finally responded. “Having said that, I think it’s normal to have any number of feelings about sex. And it’s absolutely normal to not want to have it, for any number of reasons. But I think, being afraid of sex can be disruptive and painful, and in that case I think it’s something worth addressing. Shaun, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to ask you a question,” she finished. Rivka was aware of his discomfort around being asked questions, and because of this she rarely asked them. When she did, she always sought his permission first.

“Okay,” Shaun agreed. His mouth was dry.

“Do you think it might be helpful to talk to someone about this?”

“I don’t need therapy,” Shaun responded, becoming agitated. “I have never been sexually assaulted.”

“I’m not trying to imply that I thought you were,” Rivka said hurriedly. “Regardless of your history, if you’re struggling with this, I think counseling could help you.”

“Therapy is for helping someone who has a mental illness or who has undergone significant trauma. I do not have a mental illness, and nothing very bad has happened to me for a long time,” Shaun retorted.

“I don’t want to pressure you to make any sort of decision,” Rivka said soothingly. “Having said that, therapy can be helpful if you’re going through a hard time with something. You don’t need to meet certain criteria for horrible circumstances in order to benefit from it.”

Shaun was silent, rocking back and forth on his heels and staring at the space just to the side of Rivka’s head. Adrenaline was still leaving his system after the tense wait for Lea to leave, and words dwindled. His mind raced, but converting thoughts and emotions into verbal speech took a special kind of processing power that he rarely possessed much of on a Friday night after a long week of working with patients.

Rivka peered at him from across the room, her dark eyes intense and searching. “I’m sorry if I was out of line, Shaun. And I’m sorry that I upset you.”

“You were not out of line,” Shaun said bluntly. “You have assisted me for several months. You care about me. You suggested that I go to therapy because you were concerned for my well-being. But I am fine. There is no need for you to worry.”

“Alright, Shaun,” she said softly. “I trust you.”

The words of validation, so totally unexpected, filled Shaun up like warm honeyed tea. He felt them settle in his stomach. “Goodnight, Rivka,” he said, following behind her as she headed to the door.

“Goodnight, Shaun,” she responded, smiling, the corners of her eyes crinkling. Then she headed out, closing the door gently behind her.

Shaun wandered over to his bedroom and dropped down onto his bed. A rare sensation, calm radiated through his body and softened his muscles. He mouthed the words over again: *I trust you.*

He leaned back in bed and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He usually kept it on silent when he wasn’t at work or on call, but he’d become accustomed to checking it periodically because with a job like his, you could never be certain when someone would need to reach you. On the screen was one notification: three unread text messages from Lea. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and steeled himself to read them.

Thank you so much for reading, and thank you to everyone who's been following this story! This was a short chapter, but I plan to have another one out in the next several days (and Lea will be back, FINALLY). As always, I really appreciate every single comment I receive, and I am always open to any and all feedback!

Hiatus

Hi everyone.

I am posting this chapter to let people know that I am officially on hiatus until further notice. I know that my posting schedule is sporadic as it is, but I wanted to say something because I know there are a few people following this story. I really appreciate you folks and don't want to leave you hanging.

I am a full time student and I'm struggling to keep up in school due to recent events in my life. For this reason, I am planning to bring this story back in 2-3 weeks, when my semester ends. I am currently part-way through writing 3 new chapters, so I do have new content on the horizon.

But the primary reason I'm taking a break is this: I don't know if I can keep watching The Good Doctor. (long-winded explanation ahead)

Recently, The Good Doctor official Facebook page posted a video in conjunction with TACA. I was devastated that they chose to partner with such an anti-science, anti-autism organization. TACA was one of the original and more influential anti-vaccine groups in the United States, and continues to spread misinformation about vaccines and encourage folks not to vaccinate according to CDC and other major medical organizations' recommendations. They also promote restrictive diets, chelation, and the extensive use of vitamin supplements, among other potentially dangerous and scientifically unfounded treatments for autism. They are closely affiliated with the sketchy Autism Research Institute, which was responsible for the since-discontinued Defeat Autism Now! protocol, also pseudoscience. I don't want to post a lengthier explanation for my opposition to TACA here, but please feel free to message me on tumblr if you want to know more about why I oppose this organization. (I'd respectfully ask that you please don't come to my tumblr to defend TACA, but feel free to voice any opinion you may have in the comments here.)

I am an autistic adult, and I feel betrayed. One thing that I appreciated about The Good Doctor was the general attitude of autism acceptance. The focus isn't on curing Shaun, it's on following his adventures as he tries to live his best life and stay true to himself despite the obstacles he faces (just like any other character). The episode 22 Steps in particular cemented my trust in this program, as it exposes the dangers of the "Autism Parent" curebie mentality. The ideology that TACA promotes is exactly that of the parents in 22 Steps, the ideology/treatment approach that, in the narrative, nearly kills a child. The story resonates because it is based in reality. Such attitudes have harmed and even killed other autistic people. They have personally harmed me in the past and I still struggle with lasting effects of the trauma of certain interventions.

I need to take a breather and figure out where all this puts me as an autistic person who has fallen in love with this show. Do I cut ties altogether? Do I continue to watch with a more critical eye? To I continue to engage with fan-made content while no longer watching the show? Regardless, I want to finish what I started with this story.

I know that as a viewer, I have no personal connection to this television show or anyone behind it. Nevertheless, I believe that a television show that centers on a person that belongs to a specific marginalized group owes that group respectful treatment. I see echoes of the abuse autistics routinely face in the way that the show is treating my community. One way autistics are often abused is this: our culture, talents, and pain are appropriated and taken advantage of for financial gain, and then those same folks who are "celebrating" us advocate for organizations and solutions that harm us. Sadly, this is not new.

So I have to figure out how I'm going to proceed. If you got this far, thanks for reading. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

Thank you so much for supporting me and my writing.

Careful

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER/CONTENT WARNING: violent intrusive thoughts (abruptly introduced)

I'm back! Freddie Highmore wrote S2 E1 and apparently I'm all in again, lol. Besides, I promised I would finish this story! I hope you enjoy the latest chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shaun I know what happened was super awful but I feel like this is spiraling out of control

We haven't spoken in 13 days

Listen I think I have a plan will you just talk to me please?

Shaun, lying back on his bed with his phone propped up against his knees, struggled to come up with a reply. Haltingly, he began to type.

Okay. Too curt. Potentially rude. He deleted that and tried again.

I'm sorry that I made yo No. Lea knew his feelings about apologies. If he had to do it over again, he would choose the same behavior. She'd see right through his insincerity, and besides, he had a genuine interest in making things better, not just placating hurt feelings. Better to try something more truthful.

Sometimes when you touch me I remember His fingers froze as he imagined the different ways he could finish that sentence, the way the words would look, typed out cold on a glowing screen. No. Definitely not.

He sat up, put his phone back in his pocket, and got to his feet. He stopped briefly at the door to put on his shoes before he left his apartment and walked down the hall a short distance to end up in front of Lea's door.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and knocked.

As he listened to her footsteps approach he contemplated running back to his apartment, but in no time at all the door was open and Lea was standing before him, still holding her gaming controller in one hand. A small smile flickered across her face before she rolled her eyes. "Fucking *finally*," she declared, and grabbed Shaun's hand, pulling him into the apartment.

He yanked his hand out of her grasp reflexively as she closed the door. Then they stood face to face in the entryway. Shaun twisted his hands together, and Lea crossed her arms, the

controller pressed against the side of her body.

“Okay, listen, Shaun,” she said, “I’m not going to ask you why you’ve been avoiding me, or why you ran out of my apartment in the first place, or what kind of a relationship you think that we have at this point. I *could*,” she said pointedly, gritting her teeth, “but I’m not.”

“You’re angry at me,” Shaun said, stepping backwards.

Lea took a breath. “Okay, yeah, I’m a little bit pissed but please just let me finish.”

“Okay,” Shaun responded, fighting the urge to turn and escape.

“I’m not going to ask you all those questions because they would not address the one absolutely crucial thing that this--” and here she gestured between the two of them “--is missing.”

“I don’t understand,” Shaun said warily.

“Fun, Shaun. I think we need to do something fun. Whatever it is that we have, I don’t want it to feel like a visit to the fucking orthodontist.”

“Does that make you the orthodontist, and me the patient, or you the patient and me the orthodontist?” Shaun asked.

“No, I meant, like pulling teeth, Shaun,” Lea responded. “It’s an idiom.”

“Orthodontists don’t typically pull teeth,” Shaun replied. “They usually refer a patient to a general dentist or an oral surgeon. They can do it, but most times they don’t.”

“I appreciate your medical knowledge and it has been duly noted,” Lea responded, beginning to smile, “but we’re moving away from the point. What I think we need is to go out and have a good time together. You know, remember why we actually like each other. I think that might make it easier to talk to each other.” She sighed, running her free hand through her hair. The red streaks had started to fade. “I don’t know if that makes any sense. I just miss you. And I thought--”

“Okay,” Shaun interrupted. “We can have fun. I don’t want to talk about it either.”

“We have to talk about it eventually, though,” Lea replied cautiously.

“I know,” Shaun agreed, “but not now.”

“Okay,” Lea said, a bit shakily. “Do you trust me?”

Shaun didn’t reply, averting his eyes and wringing his hands.

“Sorry, that was a question. And a cliché, anyways. I’ve got a plan but I want it to be a surprise,” Lea said, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet.

Shaun’s heart raced. “Okay,” he agreed.

Suddenly, Lea was in motion, shoes, bag, car keys, standing at the door impatiently, all ready to go in a matter of seconds in the energetic and efficient way that made Shaun's stomach lurch pleasantly. It was all he could do to fall into step behind her as she was out the door after waiting just exactly long enough to make sure that Shaun could keep up, and no more than that.

Dizzy in a nice way, he momentarily fell back into memory: remembered the pretty occupational therapist he saw when he was twelve, the phantom feeling of her hands breaking his fall as he tumbled for the umpteenth time off of the low balance beam. She'd taught him to like walking in a straight line, fighting with the errant impulses of his brain to place one foot exactly in front of the other. It was mastery and control, but it required not only discipline but also a willingness to lose himself first to the pull of gravity and the safe return into another person's hands. Here he was, waiting to fall, to tumble back into Leah's open arms again.

Much to Shaun's surprise, they passed Lea's nicer car in the garage and headed to her less flashy, more practical car. He said nothing, but his sympathetic nervous system kicked into higher gear, his fingers stiff as he buckled his seatbelt. This choice of vehicle was unusual for an outing meant to be fun. Unfamiliarity unsettled Shaun; lack of routine left him unmoored. And a detail as inexplicable as the car did something else--it scared Shaun, it truly terrified him, because if logic dictates that a person should be acting a certain way but they aren't, then there is no way to brace for what they will do.

Lea, unaware of Shaun's inner monologue, was humming under her breath as she backed the car out and merged onto the main road. Asphalt hurtled underneath them, the turn of the earth hurled them towards darkness; Lea's hair curled delicately behind her ear, fluttered slightly when she clenched her jaw. She clicked on the radio and noise poured out of the speakers. Shaun observed the street and the sky and the flickering lights of the city tangling in the strands of Lea's hair and thought about how he hated surprises. He hated surprises, and therefore he felt fear and anxiety when faced with them (the heart palpitations, sweating, and stomach upset he was currently experiencing were a testament to that) and he didn't have to feel anything else, that was *enough*, and he pushed back and pushed back as he felt another feeling, warm and carbonated, rising in him and mingling with the fear.

What could account for what was undeniably pleasure humming through his body? And the most curious thing (as the street slid by underneath) was that this pleasure wasn't in spite of the fear he was feeling, it was inexplicably knotted up with it. Shaun gritted his teeth and kept his eyes open, drinking in everything that was so so close.

They didn't drive for long. Soon, they pulled into a familiar parking lot, which was now empty, and Lea parked the car in a spot near the middle.

"You hated this grocery store," Shaun commented. His mind briefly drew back to the day that felt like forever ago, the feeling of triumph as they tumbled over the threshold into Lea's apartment laden down with bags of food. *Come sit on the couch with me.*

"Grocery store's closed. We're not going grocery shopping," Lea said coyly, relishing the big reveal of her plan.

Right, because she's going to rape you and smother you with the blanket in the back of the car and dump your body in the--

Stop. Stop. Stop.

The pleasant feeling was gone. Now Shaun had to answer to these thoughts, and in this position in the dark with no sense of understanding all he had was *Stop*. Which was not very much at all.

"You okay, Shaun?" Lea asked, squinting at him in the dark.

Shaun nodded. His knuckles were white as he gripped his seatbelt against his chest.

Lea turned off the car, took the keys out of the ignition, and with a dramatic flourish of her arm, handed them to Shaun. He accepted them, stunned as realization dawned on him.

"I can't drive," Shaun said firmly, even as he closed his hand around the keys and relished the feeling of the press of plastic and metal into his palm.

"I know you can't," Lea said brightly, "which is why I'm going to teach you. But for real this time."

"You are a *very bad* driving instructor," Shaun said, loading the words with as much force as possible.

"I *was* a very bad driving instructor," Lea corrected him, "but I promise, I've changed my ways." Shaun opened his mouth to retort, but Lea cut him off, "Listen, Shaun, please just give me a chance to explain, okay?"

Shaun set his mouth and very deliberately turned his head away from her, indicating that he would listen but that he had serious misgivings.

Lea took a breath, and began speaking on the exhale. "Last time I tried to teach you how to drive, I went way too fast. I did it all wrong. Sink or swim." She took a breath, and then slowly continued. "I guess that's how I learned to do pretty much everything in my life. Fixing cars, working with machines, I mean I practically grew up in the family garage. I guess one day someone just tossed me a lug wrench and said, 'tighten that bolt up,' and I guess I just had to figure out how to do it. Hell, you know what, Shaun?" she said, getting caught up in her speech, "That was *literally* how I learned to swim. My older brother threw me into the deep end of the indoor pool at the YMCA during family free swim. The lifeguard threw a fit." She chuckled slightly, and paused.

Shaun took the opportunity to interject. "I know how to swim. Driving is not like swimming. Driving involves controlling a two-ton vehicle with the potential to seriously injure or kill many people."

Lea smiled. "In certain ways, driving and swimming are very much not alike," she conceded. "But my point is that I've thought about it a lot after you nearly wrecked the

Tomato and I think that sometimes, when you're doing new things it makes sense to be a little more... careful," she said, feeling out the words in her mouth as she said them.

Shaun scoffed. "I'm always careful," he said.

"But I'm not," Lea shot back. Shaun swiveled in his seat to look at her. Her large hazel eyes were wide and serious. "Tonight... I promise I will be," she said.

"Okay," Shaun said, nodding slowly. Without looking back at her, he opened the car door decisively and stepped out into the brisk night air. The quiet swirled around and filled the space like liquid, the city noise muffled underneath it. He crossed through it, behind the car, and waited next to the driver's side door to switch spots with Lea. She ducked out and ran around to the passenger's seat, climbing in and looking up at Shaun expectantly. He hesitated for a moment before getting into the driver's seat and focusing his eyes on the empty lot.

"Alright, so you remember how to turn it on, right?" Lea prompted.

Shaun put the key in the ignition and started the car.

"Nice," Lea responded. "Okay, now keep your foot on the brake and put it in drive."

Shaun pushed the stick shift from park to drive with a steady hand.

"And now take your foot off the break and just let the car roll. This lot has a slight slope, so it will move automatically. Just practice braking."

The car inched forward. Almost instantly, Shaun slammed his foot on the brake. He felt the seatbelt dig into his chest as he saw Lea jerk forward out of the corner of his eye and catch herself against the dashboard. "And a seatbelt would be a good idea," she said, reaching over and hastily clicking hers on. He swallowed thickly, mouth suddenly dry.

"Alright, good start," she said, once she'd composed herself. "Now do it again."

Shaun exhaled a tight, shallow breath and slowly eased his foot off the brake again. This time, he waited a second longer before braking, struggling against his immediate impulse to stop the car at all costs and trying to be a little gentler. The car jerked to a stop again, but not as dramatically as before.

"Sweet," Lea said approvingly. "Do it again."

"There is a shopping cart," Shaun pointed out nervously.

"Shaun, that shopping cart is on the other side of the parking lot," Lea said, squinting as she attempted to make it out in the darkness.

"I should go move it," Shaun said, putting the car in park.

"No, don't move it!" Lea laughed. "We'll just turn when we get to it. We'll go around it."

Shaun remained frozen in place, his hands gripping the steering wheel.

“Back into drive,” she coaxed him.

He complied, but left his foot glued to the brake.

“We’re just going to practice braking for now,” she said. “I want you to feel confident in your ability to stop the car.”

Shaun eased his foot off the brake and then braked. Again and again and again until it became a rhythm, smoother and smoother until the knot in his stomach unraveled and they no longer bounced against the seat backs with every stop.

“Alright, you bored now?” Lea asked, grinning.

Shaun didn’t reply but smiled slightly, waiting with his foot on the brake.

“Now: the accelerator!” Lea declared dramatically.

His anxiety assuaged, Shaun’s prior training kicked in again. He eased his foot down on the accelerator and they jumped forward, soon moving at a steady clip of 10 miles per hour.

“Nice!” Lea exclaimed excitedly. “You remember how to turn, right? Because we’re about to hit that shopping cart.”

“I see it,” Shaun insisted. “It is still far away.”

“Okay,” Lea responded nervously. “Wait--not okay! You’re going to--”

Shaun quickly brought the car smoothly to a stop, about a foot away from the cart. Lea exhaled a sigh of relief and laughed.

“Oh my God, Shaun, were you fucking with me?” she asked. The corner of his mouth quirked upwards slightly. “I can’t believe it, you totally were!” she exclaimed, starting to laugh again.

“I am confident in my ability to stop the car,” Shaun declared.

“Yeah, I can see that!” she replied, catching her breath. “Do you want to take a couple laps around the lot? Here, you’re going to have to back up a little first. Put it in reverse.”

Shaun cautiously reversed the car, craning to see behind himself, and then put the car in drive, turned and began to circle the perimeter of the parking lot. Slowly, he allowed the marker on the speedometer to creep upwards. 15. 20. 25.

“Yes!” Lea crowed. “You’re driving again!”

Shaun couldn’t help but smile, enjoying the feeling of smoothness as he began to understand how to slow the car slightly before heading into a turn. Soon, he could sense Lea’s impatience start building again, a little frisson of energy that prompted her body to tense and fidget. He directed his focus on tuning it out so he could continue to maneuver

around the parking lot, but a flare of anxiety crackled in his stomach as he anticipated the next request.

“Alright, ready to head out onto the open road?” she asked, sure enough. The pull of her wide, expectant gaze was intoxicating. Shaun swallowed, hesitated.

“No,” he said. Thank God it was built into his muscle memory now, practiced, read off that sheet of paper from Rivka over and over again in the bathroom mirror. *No thank you. No, I don't want to. No, I won't. No. No. No.*

He braced for the “come on, Shaun,” the gentle cajoling, the hopeful, expectant look dialed up to eleven. He felt the impulse move through her body as she opened her mouth to speak, but then she halted.

“Okay,” she said, nodding slowly.

“Okay,” Shaun repeated, to taste the word again in his mouth.

“Okay,” she affirmed.

Shaun relaxed back into the seat, the tension knocked right out of his body. He was used to being told what he was supposed to do, what he had to do, and mostly, he liked when it was Lea that was doing it. Her guidance rarely made him angry like most people's resistance to his way of doing things did; instead, it filled him with a fluttery, carbonated, nervous feeling, accompanied by a head rush when he felt her pleased reaction when he did what she wanted him to do. But sometimes, he was left feeling slightly hollow afterwards, low when he came down from the immediate thrill of being helpless at her behest. Now, he felt comfortable, self-assured, the way he always felt in the operating room and almost never felt in his relationships. He turned to her and dragged his fingers along the bumpy seam of the steering wheel, feeling powerful and vulnerable all at once.

She reached over and brushed the hair back from his forehead, her fingers lingering and then gently pulling through the curly strands before drawing back. He shivered in unexpected pleasure. She smiled wryly. “I guess I haven't been careful enough,” she murmured. “Clearly you weren't expecting me to listen to you.” She turned away from Shaun abruptly, began to fidget with the zipper on her jacket, and continued, her voice getting stronger. “I just-- I see the way other people talk down to you, how they... infantilize you, and it makes me so fucking pissed off, and I never want to treat you like you aren't capable, like I have to coddle you or let you not do things because I think you can't, but it's like, I guess sometimes I forget that it's okay if you sometimes don't do things... because you want to?” Shaun noticed that Lea finished on an upward inflection, almost like a question.

Shaun nodded twice, to indicate that he'd listened, and began to rock slightly back and forth.

“It's like...” Lea continued haltingly, turning to look up at Shaun again, “I *know* you can do things. Because you're brilliant, and empathetic, and damn *capable*, and actually pretty funny, too, just so you know. And I want-- I want you to be able to do things. And with me, like, I want us to do things, together. But... when you're ready,” she finished.

Shaun's heart rate picked up slightly. He suddenly got the feeling that they might not be talking about driving anymore.

He turned off the car, and silence flooded in again. For a moment they sat, tense, working out a new way of breathing in it.

Then Shaun spoke. "I want to be physically intimate with you," he said carefully. Lea's head whipped up to briefly make eye contact with him, before he carefully disengaged from it, re-gathered his words, and continued. "I like touching you. And I like when you touch me. I like when you touch my hair. That feels safe. And I like when you touch me in other ways. That feels good. But it doesn't feel safe. It feels like you are going to injure me."

"Why do you think I would hurt you?" she asked softly, her brow furrowing in concern. "I would never, ever want to hurt you."

"I know," Shaun replied. Then he hesitated, choosing his next words carefully. "But my body doesn't."

"Do you feel that way a lot?" she asked. "Like you're about to get hurt?"

"Yes," Shaun responded. His eyes filled with tears, and he struggled not to blink, lest they fall down his cheeks and give part of him away.

But Lea noticed. "Come here," she asked, drawing him to her gently so that his head was pressed awkwardly against her shoulder. Shaun was really too tall for this to work comfortably, and his elbows and the center console in the car got in the way. But he managed to fit himself against her, and once he settled she brought both hands up and rubbed them through his hair, nails dragging against his scalp. He let out a soft little "um" reflexively, a low, short sound closer to a hum than a moan. He sank willingly into the pleasurable sensation, and as she continued to massage, he felt something heavy and compacted start to break down inside his chest and disperse throughout his body. Tears streamed silently from his eyes and soaked the fabric of her shirt. His body shook with muffled sobs.

Eventually, he stopped crying, and her hands stopped moving, coming to rest in the short hair at the back of his head. Their breathing unconsciously synced as deep, shaky breaths gradually softened like waves settling in the sea.

"You know, Shaun..." Lea began quietly, and then trailed off, as if unable to find the words to come next.

"I love you, Lea," Shaun murmured into the crook of her neck. He took deep breaths, inhaling her scent. His body was starting to get sore from the awkward position but he felt he might never want to move.

Her fingers curled in his hair. "I love you too," Lea said softly.

They rested there. The lights inside of the car automatically shut off. The dark covered them like a blanket. Shaun waited for disturbing thoughts to intrude, but none came.

Finally, Shaun could no longer ignore the way his back was complaining about the position he was in, and he drew back. When he met Lea's eyes, they were rimmed with red, and the mascara underneath her eyes was slightly blurry, smudging off against her skin.

"So..." she said, wiping underneath her eyes with her fingers, "I guess I should get in the driver's seat again." Shaun nodded, they switched seats, and Lea turned the car on again. The engine roared to life. Shaun thrilled again; even though they were doubtlessly driving home again, it felt like they were embarking on another unfamiliar adventure.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, I've returned from hiatus, feeling very refreshed. And with 20 more college credits completed than the last time I posted! Just a thought: reading back over my other author's notes, I realize that I come across as kind of complain-ey, and that negativity isn't the energy I want to be putting out there into the world. I'm lucky enough to have many wonderful people and things in my life that bring me joy and help support me through hard times. I think I end up posting about the negative stuff partly to vent and partly because I feel like mentioning the more positive things would involve more identifying information. But I'm going to adjust going forward, and thanks for bearing with me. :)

Anyways, thank you so much for reading! I hope you liked the chapter. Any comments or feedback would be wonderful and so appreciated! More to come.

Focus On Yourself

“Happy birthday, Claire!” Shaun said, hurrying up to the nurses’ station where she stood, examining a patient’s file.

She looked up, momentarily shocked at the unexpected interruption, and then broke into a warm smile. “Thanks, Shaun,” she said. “You’ve been remarkably chipper the past week. Did you work things out with Lea?”

Shaun nodded, rocking back and forth slightly on his feet happily. “I have a birthday present for you,” he said, “but you have to drive us to its location.”

Claire raised her eyebrows. “Alright, Shaun... I’m free during our break between shifts today, if that works for you.”

Shaun nodded affirmatively. Just as Claire opened her mouth as if to ask more, their attending strode over to them.

“Browne, Murphy,” Neil Melendez greeted them, nodding at each of them in turn. “Good morning. As you can probably tell, today is remarkably empty, at least for now. Which is good for the people of San Jose, I guess, but bad for you. Unfortunately you’re both assigned to scutwork by default, at least until there’s something more to do. I’ll tell you your responsibilities in just a moment, but first, a reminder. As you’re aware, Saint Bonaventure’s biggest networking event is a week from today. This is your opportunity to get to know your colleagues, make connections, and generally present yourselves as the bright, capable young physicians I know you to be. And while this isn’t a fundraiser, per se, people from many different departments will be attending, including people in very high places. Which brings me to my next point. It’s customary for a surgical resident to give a short speech discussing their experiences as a member of the Saint Bonaventure team. After much careful deliberation, we’ve chosen you, Claire.”

Claire’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open for a moment before she shook herself into composure again. “With all due respect, why me?” She paused for a moment, glancing around. Her eyes alighted on Shaun. She continued, “Why not Shaun? He may be quiet, but he’s perfectly capable of giving a speech.”

Neil laughed. “No offense, Murphy, but this one has to be short, sweet, and *intelligible*. We don’t have much room for obscure metaphors about smelling and tasting environmental conditions.” He turned to Claire. “You’re bright, articulate, you have a winning personality. Besides, the whole team has already weighed in. Got it?” Before either resident could answer, he continued. “Alright. Dr. Browne, there’s a pediatric patient in room four with an earache. Go address that. Murphy, you’re coming with me today. We’re reviewing the chart of every patient that came in last night during a mass casualty, a roof collapse. I know you weren’t working that shift, but we just need to verify that we’ve dotted our i’s and crossed our t’s, so to speak.” He glanced over at Shaun, then clarified, “We need to make sure all the paperwork that should have been finished is done. A nurse notified us this morning that a patient’s

antibiotics were not recorded in his chart, so we need to make sure there aren't any more errors. I'll show you what we need to do."

The first shift of the day was long and tedious, and when it finally came to a close, Shaun and Claire were both wishing they didn't have to work another in just a few hours. Shaun made a beeline for Claire's car without stopping so much as to say goodbye to his co-workers. When she arrived at her car several minutes later, she looked momentarily surprised, as though she'd forgotten why he was there. Then she remembered, sighing with exhaustion before gamely climbing in as Shaun wasted no time taking up the co-pilot's position in the passenger seat. They'd been on a number of outings having assumed just these positions, and while Claire was forever grateful that Shaun had opened up to her and for the friendship they'd built, one of the unfortunate downsides was that, with increased social comfort, Shaun had become quite the backseat driver.

Now, however, Claire's adjustment to fielding his unsolicited commentary and instruction on her driving would come in handy as he directed her to their mystery destination, as she hadn't a clue where they were going. Her confusion deepened as he directed her outside of the city limits. They usually never strayed far from their little circle of San Jose. Finally, Shaun directed her into a gas station parking lot, smiling triumphantly.

"I have plenty of gas, Shaun," she said, mystified. "Exactly how far are we driving? We have another shift in two hours."

"We're finished driving," he responded. "We have reached our destination."

Claire glanced around rapidly in confusion, before her eyes landed on the convenience store and realization dawned on her. She broke into a grin. "So this is where it all began," she remarked.

"Yes," Shaun confirmed. His facial expressions gave very little away, but Claire was practiced at reading him, and she could tell that he was ridiculously pleased with himself.

"So, I suppose you have a different agenda for us than the last time we were here," she remarked, "seeing as we're not racing to transport a human organ."

Shaun nodded. "We are getting slushies. I'm going to pay for them, because it's your birthday," he said.

Minutes later, they sat outside on the edge of the pavement, taking in the warm sunshine as they sipped their drinks. "It's a pity that the cashier from our first visit wasn't working today," Claire remarked. "It would have been priceless to see his expression if he recognized us."

Shaun didn't respond, steadily drinking. Suddenly, he slammed down his drink next to him and squeezed his eyes shut, clapping his hands to his forehead.

"You okay, Shaun?" Claire asked, only mildly concerned. She was used to Shaun's idiosyncrasies at this point.

“It’s very cold,” he managed.

Claire nodded in understanding. “Touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth,” she said. “That helps.”

“Thank you,” Shaun said in relief, after he recovered. “Your suggestion was helpful.”

Claire half-smiled in response, gazing out at the mostly unoccupied gas pumps. Heat shimmered above the asphalt. “Wow, what a view,” she said.

Shaun had returned to steadily sucking down his drink, apparently unperturbed by both her sarcasm and his prior bout of brain freeze.

“I’m glad I’m here with you, though,” she said sincerely, looking at Shaun again. “You’re a good friend.”

Shaun blushed and chewed on his straw.

They sat in companionable silence for another moment, taking in the bright sunlight, the roar of car engines, and the smell of gasoline, before Claire spoke again. “I don’t have any idea about what I’ll say in this speech Melendez sprang on me this morning. Did you have any idea about this?”

Shaun shook his head.

“I mean, one week isn’t a lot of time to prepare a speech!” she said indignantly.

“You’re a good speaker,” Shaun countered. “Like Doctor Melendez said, you have a winning personality.”

“Ugh,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I can never tell when you’re being sincere and when you’re being an asshole.”

“I am being sincere,” Shaun said, turning back to his drink.

“Well, thanks Shaun,” Claire said.

“You should talk about you,” Shaun declared.

“I think that’s obvious, Shaun,” Claire returned.

“No, it is not,” Shaun said. “You’re selfless. That means you focus on other people. You don’t like to focus on yourself. For this speech, you should focus on yourself.”

Claire nodded slowly. “Alright, Shaun,” she said, turning over his words in her mind. Then she slurped the remaining dregs of her drink. “We should probably get some actual food and some rest before our next shift. These doubles are brutal. It was good to get some fresh air, though. And a change of scenery.”

Shaun nodded. "We should drive back to the hospital. We can get sandwiches and you can take a nap in the break room."

Claire pushed herself up off the pavement. "Sounds like a good plan, Shaun," she replied. Shaun got up off the curb as well, brushing himself off gingerly. "I wonder if tonight will be as mind-numbingly boring as this morning." Claire said as they walked to the car, "Sometimes I feel like it's more difficult to have a shift when nothing happens than one where everything is happening at once."

"'Nothing' did not happen during our shift," Shaun replied. "We had plenty of scutwork."

"Well, I hope we have more to do than scutwork," Claire said.

Shaun rested his head against the passenger side window and closed his eyes on the drive back, as Claire focused on driving. When they returned to the hospital, Claire's prayers were answered. Melendez was waiting for them, and ushered them over urgently. "Dr. Murphy, Dr. Browne, it's all hands on deck. Two patients came in while you were gone in critical condition. One Bradley Ambrose, slipped and fell on the family's pool deck and fractured his skull. The momentum carried him into the water and he almost drowned before they managed to pull him out. The other is Andrea Cortez, an eight year old girl with severe chest pains and no known history of cardiovascular problems or any injury that might explain the issue, according to the family. We're running an EKG but her condition seems to be worsening rapidly."

Break forgotten, Claire and Shaun both listened attentively. They were in for a long day, but Shaun was gratified that they finally had the chance to help people and put their skills to good use.

Practiced

Chapter Notes

This is the explicit sexual content mentioned in the tags. It's my first time sharing or publishing this sort of thing, so I apologize for any cringe. Please let me know your thoughts in the comments down below, as there will probably be another sex scene before the story wraps up.

Content Warning: aside from the sexual content, Shaun deals with intrusive thoughts and dissociation again towards the end of this chapter. There is a mention of rape.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shaun sighed contentedly and leaned back into the cushioned corner of the couch that had unofficially become his spot. His relaxed posture was the only giveaway of his drowsiness; his eyes were bright and alert as he took in the weather forecast on the television. The soothing, even tone of the meteorologist's voice blended together with the background noise of the shower running; the walls in Lea's apartment were thin. Light filtered into the living room through shades that were partially drawn. It was mid-morning on a Saturday, but it felt much earlier to Shaun, as though this stretch of daytime was merely an extension of the long night before.

Shaun's mind drifted back to the medical crises they'd dealt with the prior evening. While it had been touch and go for the first hour, ultimately Bradley Ambrose's brain surgery was a success and he had stabilized. Despite not having yet regained consciousness, he would likely make a full recovery. As for their other patient, Andrea, it was Claire that had determined the correct diagnosis in time to get the child into surgery before her condition led to any permanent secondary negative effects on her body. But their ultimately successful outcomes had come at the cost of many intense hours of split-second decision making and frantic racing against the clock to resolve numerous complications.

After his shift at the hospital, he'd been wired, unable to sleep, so, after a brief shower taken in near-darkness to stave off a blossoming headache, he went down the hallway and knocked on Lea's door. She never seemed to mind being woken up, as far as he could tell, but after herding him towards the couch and tossing a pillow his way, she'd disappeared back into her bedroom and didn't emerge until her alarm started blaring at ten a.m. At that point, she stumbled out of her room and made a beeline for the bathroom without so much as acknowledging Shaun's presence, save perhaps for her hands attempting to tamp down bright hair that was a tangled mess. He'd watched her go silently before turning his attention back to the television, taking her wakeful presence as permission to turn the volume up, and absently wondered whether she remembered he was there.

That question was answered soon enough, when he heard her calling his name over the sound of running water. He bolted upright immediately, a spark of fear traveling up his spine. His adrenaline hadn't quite settled from his shift several hours ago, and a series of worst case scenarios flashed through his mind. Quickly, he rushed over and threw open the bathroom door, which had been left unlocked, with a medical sense of urgency that overrode his typical careful adherence to certain boundaries.

Lea poked her head out from around the shower curtain, holding onto the edge so that it covered the rest of her body. Water beaded on her skin, running in droplets down from her hair. She grinned at Shaun, and while this didn't set him at ease, it did rule out several of the worst case scenarios that might explain his summoning.

"Good morning," she said brightly.

"Good morning," Shaun mirrored, twisting his hands together. They suddenly felt painfully unoccupied.

"I totally forgot that I ran out of shampoo," she said, matter-of-factly, as if this was a conversation that was happening when they were both fully clothed. "I got a new bottle, but I left it on the kitchen counter. I was wondering if you could bring it to me," she said.

Shaun stood for a moment, dumbstruck, overwhelmed--maybe it was the steam, or the smell of soap. It could have been any number of things, really, that contributed to this sudden seasick feeling, a combination of coming down from panic and physical arousal ratcheting up. His heart pounded faster, beating loudly in his ears, and, at odds with the humid environment, his mouth was very dry, making swallowing a challenge.

Her smile dropped slightly, brow furrowing in concern. "You okay, Shaun?" she asked, reaching up to wipe water away from her eyes so she could scrutinize him more closely. The shower curtain slipped down an inch.

He nodded rapidly, feeling as though it was imperative that he behave like nothing was out of the ordinary. "Yes, I am okay," he confirmed, rocking slightly backwards and forwards on his feet, before hurriedly turning and speed-walking over to the kitchen.

It was easy to locate the shampoo, which had been left out on the edge of the counter, still in the plastic bag from the pharmacy with its brightly printed red lettering. However, it was surprisingly difficult to bring it back to Lea once Shaun had it in his hands. He paused, frozen in the middle of the kitchen, on the edge of a movement. The sound of his breathing, rapid and slightly ragged, competed with the thudding of his heartbeat for his attention. He closed his eyes, taking deep, deliberate breaths, and tried to get his bearings. He couldn't pretend that he didn't know what was happening.

Shaun was considering, for the first time, the vast erotic potential of the shower, or, more specifically, Lea in the shower. Of course, he'd encountered shower sex before, in pop culture and in pornography, but the notion had never aroused him before. The act of taking a shower in and of itself bored him; showers were for washing off the sweat and grime of a grueling day, or gearing up to face a grueling day, or trying to feel clean after a particularly grueling mental boxing match against himself. He knew that some people masturbated in the shower

but he'd always felt uncomfortably closed-in and self-conscious when he tried. As for actually fucking in the shower, it seemed unnecessarily clumsy and dangerous. He'd once watched a very staged-looking video of a couple doing this very late at night on his laptop, turned off and with his heart in his throat, waiting for someone's feet to slip out from under them given the excessive amount of soap they were using, which was ominously swirling around and collecting on the tiles underneath them.

But being in such close proximity to his girlfriend as only a thin sheet of plastic separated him from her naked body had changed his perspective significantly. He couldn't help but imagine what she'd look like if she pulled the curtain aside, flushed with the warmth of the water, streams and rivulets coursing over the landscape of her body, all the places he had touched her and the places he'd never explored but so desperately wanted to. The thing with the soap suddenly made a lot more sense, as he envisioned her rubbing handfuls of body wash over her skin so that it lathered and sudsed, fingers gliding frictionless across her skin. Maybe she would even-- *Stop. Stop. Stop.* He screwed his eyes shut and clenched his hands into fists. There was no way he could go back in there. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to control his racing thoughts.

He exhaled sharply through his nose, a snort of frustration, and then opened his eyes. The bottle of shampoo felt heavy in his hands, and he ran his thumb back and forth against the cap. *Why?* Why did he feel so urgently that he had to stop? What was wrong with fantasizing about Lea's body? What was wrong with wanting to have sex with his girlfriend?

"Shaun?" Lea called from across the apartment. "You okay?"

He blinked once, hard, before hurriedly propelling himself forward towards her again with the momentum from the back and forth rocking he hadn't realized he was doing.

The steam in the bathroom hit him like a wall. Lea pushed her head out from behind the shower curtain again, still holding it up loosely with one hand. She awkwardly extended the other expectantly. Shaun noticed his cue to hand off the bottle, but he was stuck, mesmerized by the way the water darkened her hair to a deep maroon that was almost black, which in turn made her hazel eyes appear even more striking.

Lea blushed under the intensity of his gaze and drew her hand back. Her pupils dilated and her lips parted. "Shaun..." she murmured.

Shaun's face was on fire and he was acutely aware of the fact that he was panting, which was highly embarrassing, but it seemed the only alternative was to stop breathing altogether and he really couldn't keep that up for more than a minute at a time if he didn't want to pass out and hit his head on the floor. The tantalizingly insignificant distance between their bodies was practically magnetized, as though the empty space was pulling them together, and that flimsy fucking shower curtain wasn't even totally opaque--he could see the outline of her body behind it. Shaun's prediction that he wouldn't be able to keep his thoughts clean proved to be correct. There were things he wanted to do to his girlfriend involving his mouth and his fingers and, oh god, the detachable showerhead. At this point, no amount of self-flagellation was going to erase those possibilities from his mind.

Finally, he willed himself to pass her the shampoo. She took it from him and then very deliberately set it down on the edge of the bath, as though she was waiting for something else. They briefly locked eyes and then Shaun tore his gaze away, overwhelmed by the intensity. His eyes landed somewhere near the hollow of her throat, which didn't make it any easier to think. But he couldn't bring himself to close his eyes against the tide of feeling that was rising inside of him.

"Shaun," she said again, her voice still low but stronger.

Something about the cadence with which she spoke his name finally broke his resolve. Shaun crossed over to her. It only took two steps. He shook with excitement and fear and shame and wanting. As if she could feel it, Lea placed a steadying hand on his shoulder, marking his t-shirt with water. He nodded at her, once, the movement small and unmistakable. Slowly, she reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair at the back of his head, pulling him down to meet her in a kiss. As his eyes slid shut and he tasted her underneath the sudden spray of warm water, Shaun could feel the shower curtain she had been holding up between them drop.

Shaun gasped into her mouth, his hands clenching into fists and then releasing. Not daring to open his eyes, he leaned heavily into the familiarity of kissing her. There was something grounding about the practiced way that they navigated the thin line between discomfort and pleasure, manipulating the complex sensory tapestry of the act with their mouths. Normally, he knew when and where to add his hands, which were the safe places that would feel good but not so good that her reaction would prompt them both to push further, but suddenly the boundaries delineating the spaces that were safe to touch had disappeared. Hesitantly, Shaun caressed Lea's body as if for the first time, cautiously trailing his fingers up her arm, across her shoulder, and then down her back. He couldn't hear her moan over the roar of the running water but he could feel it.

Then she pulled him in further, her hands gripping the back of his shirt and then twisting in his hair, which normally he did not like because it hurt, but there was something about the sharp, painful feeling, when combined with the warmth of the steam-filled room and the wetness of cotton plastered against his skin and the heat of her mouth against his own, that traveled straight to his cock. He gave in to her willingly, pressing himself against her body, and in that moment his inhibitions were totally gone; he just wanted her to take him apart and then put him back together again.

Shaun's hands came to rest on Lea's lower back and in between waves of pleasure he wondered wildly whether he should move them further down, so that he could grip her ass in his hands and maybe sort of lift her so that he could press his thigh into the bare heat between her legs. But just before he gathered together the courage to do so, she pulled back on his hair, refocusing all of his attention and forcing their bodies apart slightly.

Shaun whined softly at the loss of contact, momentarily without words. Lea's eyes were wide, wild, pupils blown, and her face and chest were flushed pink. She breathed raggedly, and Shaun could see her pulse racing where it throbbed in an artery in her neck. "You're soaking wet," she said, and released him from her grip just long enough to gather up his now soaked-through t-shirt in her hands and pull it up over his head. It hit the ground with a wet

thwack . He broke out in goosebumps at the change of sensation on his skin and shivered. “The things I have been waiting to do to you, Shaun Murphy,” she said into his ear, dragging her fingernail across one of his hardened nipples. He cried out, and briefly thought he might cum from that sensation alone. “You have no idea what I’ve got in store for you,” she continued, biting down gently on his earlobe.

A flare of panic briefly engulfed his body. *You do know* , he reassured himself. *It’s going to be things you want*. But her attempt at dirty talk had triggered something, had released a backlog of negative emotions that he’d somehow managed to hold at bay up until now. “I wonder how you want it,” she continued. She kissed the space on his neck just underneath his ear. “I wonder what you fantasize about.”

In a single breath Shaun slid from the heavy breathing of arousal into hyperventilation. He jerked away from Lea, and she stumbled before catching herself with a hand against the tiled wall. “I don’t, I don’t, I don’t, I don’t,” he chanted. Lea’s face fell, and her eyes widened in fear and concern. “I *don’t* want it,” Shaun said miserably. He balled his hands into fists and began to pound them against his temples.

“Shaun, Shaun!” she cried out, and then forced her voice into a more even tone. “It’s okay, Shaun, it’s okay,” she soothed. Hurriedly, she turned off the shower and stepped out, grabbing a towel from a hook on the wall and wrapping it around her body. Shaun shrank away from her, sinking to the ground and pressing his back against the wall. He drew his knees into his chest and wrapped his arms around them, gripping himself tightly, and pressed his forehead against his knees, hard.

“Shaun,” she said, repeating his name again. This time, there was no anxiety, no urgency. He looked up sharply and saw that her demeanor was almost serene. “I’m going to get you a glass of water,” she said calmly, and left for the kitchen, dripping a trail of water onto the floor. Shaun retreated inward, the hollow place between his knees and his chest his only reservoir of safety. Sometimes, the present was gone, but memories didn’t supersede reality; instead, there were just feelings--not even whole ones, just bits and pieces:

Your hand sliding across the wall

Your body is moving you aren’t right-side-up

You’ll never ever leave

Always always always

You’re worthless

This is what the carpet feels like on your face

Which tangled together into an overall sensation of spiraling wildly out of control.

Lea returned, bearing a glass of water. Shaun saw her but she didn’t integrate yet. She stood for a moment, assessing, and then knelt down and gently pressed the glass against the back of his hand until he uncurled just enough to take it from her. It was freezing cold; ice

cubes bobbed at the surface of the water. He tipped back the glass to take a sip and they bit at his lips. The soft sharpness drew him slowly back.

She sat back against the wall next to him, still wrapped in the towel, her bare legs stretched out in front of her on the tile floor. Shaun observed in a half-detached way the tiny half moons at the tops of each of her toenails, the short, fine hairs that had started to grow in on her legs since the last time she'd shaved. All that warm skin. He pushed himself towards her and pressed his face into her hair. Wet but still unwashed, it smelled comfortingly of her body. He inhaled deeply, feeling his body begin to wake up again with the rush of oxygen.

Even as he leaned into her, she refrained from touching him, her arms wrapped around herself as though to physically prevent herself from reaching out and pulling him close. She allowed him to make his own way into the physical contact. Eventually, he draped an arm across her body. They sat in silence, the bathroom fan humming, the steam clearing out of the room.

Lea began to shiver. "Shaun," she murmured. His response was to sigh into her hair. "I think I need to dry off and put something on," she said. He didn't move, only pressed himself more firmly against her. "Come on," she coaxed gently. "You'll come with me."

She disentangled herself from him, pushing herself up off the ground and then guiding Shaun up with her. Gently, she took his hand and led her the short distance to her bedroom. Despite their level of intimacy, this was a location Shaun had rarely visited. It normally felt too charged, too rife with possibilities. However, in his dissociative state, the consideration of sex was absent. It felt like a sanctuary.

Lea helped Shaun over to the bed and he complied, climbing into it stiffly and burrowing under the covers so that only the top of his face peeked out. She turned her back to him, facing the closet, and dried and dressed herself in sweatpants and a t-shirt. Staring fuzzily, Shaun visualized the parts of her body underneath the skin, listing their names in his mind methodically, layer by layer.

She turned back to him, strode over with a bit of her usual assertiveness returning to her step, and climbed into bed next to Shaun, drawing up the covers around them. She curled onto her side facing Shaun, and he pressed his forehead against the top of her breastbone, nuzzling into her. He could hear her heartbeat slow and feel it naturally become the metronome for his breathing. Inch by inch, he pressed himself nearer to her, until he could feel soft cotton against his bare chest and the warmth of her body underneath it.

Once the muscles in Shaun's body had all unclenched and he settled heavy against her, Lea began to comb her fingers through his hair. He hummed, a low sound that resided in his chest. Gradually, what remained of his previous terror dissipated. He thought, *if this is what we're going to do now when things go wrong, I wouldn't mind trying again.*

Shaun thought Lea wasn't going to say anything, but after several minutes, when he had half drifted off to sleep, she spoke softly. "So," she said, "I'm wondering what happened..."

Shaun was silent. In this safe and quiet moment, the reasons laid themselves out quite clearly. The letting-go of sex, the access it afforded another to his body, was forever tangled

up with the repeated physical violations he'd endured in childhood. The act of being exposed about to remove his clothing in front of a girl and viciously mocked and shamed had, inexplicably, Shaun felt, left a mark just as would a beating. The constant commentary growing up, whispers and jeers of *pervert*, *faggot*, *disgusting* had wormed their way inside of him. The little incidents of sexual embarrassment at the hands of others, none of which he felt was overtly assault, compounded each other. And, of course, the deepest hurt, and the hardest to consider: overhearing as his mother was raped on the other side of the bedroom wall had scarred his own psyche as though he'd been the one being violated.

But it was too much to speak aloud at once, and part of it wouldn't be enough. So Shaun said nothing, but wrapped his arm around Lea and succumbed to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, please let me know if that was cringey or not, and anything that could be improved or that worked well. This is the last Uncomfortable Sexual Situation for Shaun in this story!! It will be smooth(er) sailing from here on out. This isn't some kind of psychological torture porn, I promise. We're in the home stretch.

Thank you so much for reading. And especially if you have been following this story, I truly appreciate the support!

I look forward to finishing this up before season 2 airs in September, so expect more to come very shortly.

Hello Again

Hello again everyone. Thank you so much to everyone who has read my story, especially those of you who have been kind and thoughtful enough to leave kudos and comments. I haven't forgot about you, or this story, and still notice every kudo/comment that comes in.

A little while ago, a wonderful new person came into my life. I gradually found out that, coincidentally, they were coping with some similar things (read: not exactly the same things) that certain characters in this fictional story are dealing with. Real life hit hard, and I needed to take a break from writing about this subject matter and put focus into other areas of my life, including supporting my friend.

I'm happy to say that things are going well. Unfortunately, this story is on an indefinite hold, while I continue to learn and grow and process. I will likely start writing new fanfiction soon.

Thank you again to everyone who has been bearing with me throughout this long journey. You have helped me progress as a writer more than you could possibly know.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!