

Snuggle Bitch
by Big Pink

Posted May 22nd, 2006

Summary: A one-shot response to the 'Stupidest Monster – Ever' challenge (over at fanfic.net). Dean's losing socks and maybe his mind. Is Sam responsible, or something a little more...cute?

Warning: Bad language everywhere. Uh, including the title.

Spoilers: Itty bitty spoilers for Hell House tomfoolery. And I'm supposing you know the basics of Faith.

a/n: I feel obliged to mention that I own no part of the Supernatural Empire, nor any aspect of a fabric softener mascot. And special acknowledgement to Mo Willems' book *Knuffle Bunny*, which you should go out and read immediately.

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Dean was acting weird.

In Sam's limited experience with other, normal, people – Stanford students, for example, who were as close to normal as Sam had met – 'acting weird' usually manifested as forgetting an exam, yelling at a roommate, even mixing up the usual milk/fridge-cereal/cupboard dichotomy.

Dean acting weird was a completely different proposition.

This morning, the eighth straight, Dean was up before dawn (not in itself out of the ordinary), looking as though he hadn't put together five minutes of sleep in a row, and he was muttering to himself as he rifled through the duffle bag of clean laundry (clean got the plain canvas gunnysack; dirty, the one a younger Dean had drawn a skull and crossbones on), scattering clothing around him like a Yankees fan with sack of peanuts.

"Dean?" Sam asked blearily, raising his head long enough to see a pair of boxers land in the artificial potted plant. "Dean!"

His brother, holding a blue sock in one hand and a striped athletic sock in the other, looked over. Dean's mouth twitched, but he didn't say anything. Sam didn't need an EMF reader to know the temperature of the room had just slid down a few degrees; Dean's expression was frosty, to say the least. They were at least 200 miles across the Texas border into New Mexico and Dean had something to say, had been on the verge of saying something for the last three days. Sam thought he knew what it might be, but Dean didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

Enough, Dean must have thought, because finally he asked, "Are you having this same problem?"

Sam rolled over on his back with a groan. "Matching socks? Seriously, man, those two? They're not even close." He would have gone on, but he understood what it probably cost Dean to admit he was having a problem, any kind of problem. Sam struggled to sit up, stared at Dean, who was obviously deeply disturbed. "You look like crap. What is bugging you so much?"

Dean didn't spare him a glance, kept going through the bag like there was loose change at the bottom. "Not a single pair. Not...one." He threw the bag against the floor with more venom than force, stood up and put his hands on his hips. "Where are they?"

Sam shrugged, his eyebrows drawn down. Oh, here it comes. “Not me. If you can’t keep track of your laundry, don’t blame me.”

“Okay. You want an apology for the spoon photo? Or the itchy pants? Fine. Sorry. Where are my fucking socks?”

Thinking that the most sorry-ass apology Dean had ever issued – and that was actually saying something – Sam choked on a laugh. “Borrow a pair of mine. It’s about time we hit a laundromat, anyway – you’re getting a little ripe. Maybe we can buy you some more socks at a Walmart,” he offered, since Dean looked about ready to throw something at him, maybe the potted plant.

Dean started to stuff his clothes back into the bag, shooting baleful looks at Sam, clearly not believing him. Dean couldn’t hold a grudge to save his life; this would blow over. And Sam was getting tired of the constant vigilance required to maintain a Winchester-style practical joke-off.

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Dean let Sam drive. Again, in itself not weird, but almost as soon as Sam had pulled out of the motel’s parking lot onto the empty winter interstate, gravel and sand and pink daybreak all around them, Dean dropped into unconsciousness, his forehead pressed against the window, his chest falling easily up and down in deepest sleep. Sam kept glancing at him, amusement turning to guilty worry over the miles. Dean really did look like shit, and he’d seen his brother look plenty bad before.

They passed through four armpit towns, each with a gas station, a diner, five bars. Gas station, diner, five bars. Over and over, mesmerizing in its simplicity and its dreariness. One of these days, couldn’t they just be in a big city for a while? Or a nice college town with a decent bagel shop? Always with the gas station, diner – oh, wait, finally – a Suds-o-matic.

He killed the engine and let the Impala glide into the angle parking spot directly in front of the laundromat. Dean didn’t stir; he’d been asleep now for three hours and would have a very ridiculous red mark on his forehead when he woke up. Sam eased his fingers around the chrome door handle, gently pulled it up as he shouldered the door open. And the heavy Impala door, designed in an era where cars were supposed to withstand a freight train’s impact, for crying out loud, squeeeeeaaaled open. Sam glanced at Dean: no reaction.

Oh God, Sam thought, remembering the hospital bed and the cardiologist, and why did Dean have to make everything so goddamn dramatic? “Dean?” he queried, and it came out in a strangled whisper. Dean didn’t move. Sam cleared his throat, could feel his own heartbeat throbbing at his temples. “Dean?” And shoved him with one hand.

Dean’s arm flew spasmodically across the space between them, connecting with Sam’s nose at an awkward angle, and Dean struggled to wakefulness, seemed to be pushing layers of invisible blankets from him. Dean, according to the Winchester family manual that Sam had been compiling since birth, woke up immediately and fully alert, ready for action. Not like this.

And not, definitely not, shouting, “Furry little bitch!”

It took some living down, that.

They bought more socks, did the laundry, drank weak coffee from chipped ceramic mugs served up by a man with a net around his hair. Sam kept smirking, trying to push his worry to the backburner, which was

relatively easy, given this ammunition. Stack of brown, some hash browns, eggs over easy. More coffee. Dean hiding behind the *Reunion Gazette*, developing an interest in a farm auction.

“So,” Sam said, unable to contain it any longer, “the little snuggle bear been giving you trouble long?”

Dean snapped the paper, and Sam watched his brother’s hand come from around the front section to grab his mug. No answer. That was okay; Sam could wait. The food arrived. Dean dropped the paper, glanced quickly at Sam before reaching for the saltshaker. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Sammy.”

That came nowhere close to squaring things up: five million uses of the despised nickname was worth approximately one snuggle bear. Sam shrugged it off, spread grape jelly on his toast. The smile stayed on his face for many miles, until they headed north, up towards Colorado, and things got a little weirder.

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This wasn’t funny anymore, even Sam would admit it. Night eleven, Dean waking up every hour, screaming about the bear. The fact that Dean used the words ‘furry little bitch’ was the only reason Sam knew what the dreams were about: Dean did not talk about it in daylight hours, not at all.

“We gotta do something about this,” Sam said softly to Dean, both of them staring at the cracked ceiling of the Painted Desert E-Z Inn, neither able to fall back into sleep, the sounds of a small town Friday night emanating from the local bar across the parking lot, headlights sweeping across the thin curtains every few minutes.

“I’ll think of something,” Dean said, but Sam knew they had nothing. Only dreams and single socks.

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She loved that bear. Grandpa had bought it for her just when she’d begun to hiccup from crying so hard. Big city, Toys-r-Us stuffed animal section and no way she was going to return home without it. He had button eyes and knubbly brown fur, and she’d loved him so much and so hard that his nose had fallen off.

She called him Knufflebunny, because that was her favourite story; grandpa had bought her the book that same trip. Her Knufflebunny was a bear, wasn’t a poopy old bunny. It made her afraid, though, the idea that your best soft friend in the world could end up going round in a clothes dryer like that, and your big stupid father wouldn’t even miss him, even when you bawled your eyes out. So she took Knufflebunny everywhere, but especially to the laundromat, where she could keep a special eye out for him.

They lived above the general store, and her mother didn’t like her to wait alone in the laundromat. Still, where else was she supposed to go when mom went to go out back for a smoke? Besides, the only other one here today was that skinny tall boy, and he didn’t look like he’d hurt a fly. She smiled at him, showed him how she was missing both teeth in front. She wanted him to see her new wiggly tooth, so she put Knufflebunny on top of the laundry basket and had the tall boy bend down to see.

And just then another guy came in, and he was scary. She knew right away that was a rifle in his hand; her grandpa had shown her how to shoot rattlesnakes last summer. The tall boy didn’t say a word, but he moved his body in front of her, which is just what she thought real grown ups were supposed to do in a situation like this.

The other guy didn’t even look at them. Instead, he pointed the gun at the laundry basket.

And then, he shot Knufflebunny dead.

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“What the *hell* were you doing? Just what kind of *fucking* maniac...” and Sam was thrown to the side as Dean took the corner faster than he ought to, their laundry abandoned in the Kleen Mart, hightailing it out of town before they could have charges brought against them for shooting up a plush toy.

Trouble was, Sam knew exactly what Dean was up to. And that had been one nasty looking bear. Creepy kid too, come to think of it. God, he was tired, was seventeen different kinds of fucked-up from lack of sleep. Both of them. And then Dean started laughing, they both did, so hard the tears started to run.

That night, they both slept like logs.

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Sam almost didn't know why it was so strange; then he pegged it. The sound that had finally wakened him, the sun blasting in the window, full daylight, was Dean – snoring. A beautiful sound, he thought. Soon annoying. Still, he smiled widely before throwing a pillow at Dean's head. The snore turned to a snort, which then dissolved into a sigh.

Dean came up on his elbows, blinking at the room warily. He looked confused for a minute, as though he couldn't really remember what a good night's sleep felt like. As Sam watched, Dean's expression turned from pleased contentment back to confusion. Dean's attention fell on Sam, who gave him the unvoiced 'what?' expression: eyebrows raised, fingers splaying outwards.

Rummaging beneath the covers, somewhere near his feet, Dean withdrew a hand from under the bedspread. Clutched between his fingers was a striped sock. Sam sat up straighter, rested his lean arms against bent knees as Dean got out of bed and pulled the covers down, completely off the bed.

“I'll be damned,” Dean whispered.

At the foot of the bed was a pile of socks, maybe thirty of them, no two alike. Dean picked through them, spotted something, then held up a square of white material. He turned it over in his hands, passed it to Sam.

“Is this what I think it is?” Sam asked.

Dean was looking through the socks as though they were a pile of money. “I swear to god, Sam, if I find out that this was you...”

And to Sam, it could have been a sheet of fabric softener, or it could have been a white flag of truce. It was hard to tell which.

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