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## Assembly Required

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## Assembley Required

"Git up," Sarah says from the bathroom as she puts makeup on.

I roll around a bit and rise from my side of the bed.

"We gotta go get that swingset." She starts makin' the bed, forces me out of it.

"A swingset? What for?" I walk to the bathroom down the hall.

"I told you this yesterday." She gives a heavy sigh. "Earlier this week I took the kids to the park and they said they wanted one and when I asked Geraldine she said to come pick it up today. Saturday."

Saturdays are all the same, like this. Always something to do. Sarah is tired, stressed, cranky from her night shifts at the hospital. I'm just as pissed off most of the time. The kids are full of energy. Not sure what does it to 'em, but I don't think I was like that. I was a kid once.

"They don't need one," I say, "they've got plenty of things to play with."

Without another word Sarah walks out of the hedroom, past the bath.

Without another word Sarah walks out of the bedroom, past the bathroom, and into the kitchen. Apparently I don't have a say in the matter.

We don't talk too much anymore, Sarah and I. Maybe it's because I think Lewis is a queer, or because she thinks I give him less attention than Hunter and Jess because of it. Maybe it's because we both work too damn much, me at the ranch, her at the hospital. Been at the ranch for eight years now, as long as me and Sarah have been married. It has its perks. We get free meat anytime we want. Free milk, too. I know this is best for us, not just money-wise either, but 'cause our kids need to grow strong so when roles reverse and they have to take care of us, they're able and healthy.

As it is with most marriages, I assume, things have changed, grown into a hard, dull routine. Eight years ago, before the kids, before the second mortgage, before Daddy's death, I can only remember nice moments, where Sarah was ear-to-ear. I was romantic back then. As romantic as I get. Back in Arlington, I gave her massages every chance I got, rubbed her feet after she'd put in her intern shifts at the MCA, before we moved to Waco. I'd surprise her with a bottle of wine from time to time, even though I'm a beer man. I'd like to think it wasn't all lust. Like to think we didn't mess up tyin' the knot and havin' kids, that we're tough enough to make it work. I like to think we're doin' it right, but I don't know.

Minutes after I step into the shower I hear the bathroom door open.

Through the curtains I see Sarah rifle through the cabinets.

"What are you lookin' for?" I ask.

When she doesn't answer I move the curtain an inch or two on its track and I see her walk out. Maybe it's 'cause I'm naked and soapy, or maybe it's 'cause months ago Sarah, without tellin' me, decided sex wasn't necessary, but I stare straight at her ass. I feel my pecker rise a bit. Her curves can still do it to me. Goddamn, those curves.

The first time I saw Sarah was when I was 18 and leading my Grand Prize runner-up steer Hank at the County Fair. She was dating Corbin Brewster at the time, a guy in my 4-H club. He was no star quarterback or son of a rich oil man, but the guy was handsome and charmin'. How he met Sarah I have no idea. Still haven't asked. But when she walked down the aisle of that barn, between rows of steers and heifers, I saw a different kind of woman I'd been used to. She had her hair done all pretty; perm, I think. Had make-up on, too, not caked, but just right. And those curves. Goddamn, those curves. I was used to beefy women with broader shoulders than me, forearms twice the size. Their asses were cinder blocks, straight down from waist to ankle.

Pitchfork full of Hank's shit in my hand, I gawked until Hank's tail hit my chest and shook me from my daze. She was with two of her friends, whose names I don't recall (neither of us stayed in touch with our friends after Jess came along). Corbin had been expecting her though, had been sitting casually in the corner, under our club's wooden, hand-etched sign with his hat resting on his head. That first time we exchanged no words. Hardly even a glance. It wasn't until day two or three of that fair week did I say anything to her.

"Bucky," I said, hand extended. "My friends call me Trusty though."

"Trusty Bucky, huh?" she said with a laugh, meeting my hand. "Why's that?"

I shifted what little weight I had back then. "Guess it's 'cause I never fumbled a ball in my life."

Sarah put her hands on her wide hips, leaned back to size me up. "You're a tailback?"

"Was. Graduated this May."

Before Sarah responded Corbin yelled at her to come outside and watch him walk his steer. He was always a good showman so I can't blame Sarah for walking out without another word, but she was in my head after that, branded to my brain.

It wasn't until two months later, after she and Corbin broke it off on account of him charming another woman, that we continued our conversation. Whether it was coincidence or fate is beyond me. I don't try to figure out things like that.

But when I saw her slouch into the grocery store like she was livin' a

country song, despair and regret written under her eyes in purple circles just dried, and walk straight to the ice cream cooler, I beat the dust from my first days at the ranch job my daddy got for me and introduced myself again as Trusty Bucky, to which she laughed and recalled. From there it was all Brooks N' Dunn and my Bronco, with everything in between. Sex, passion, intimacy, whatever you wanna call it. Simple. All we had to do was be our 18-year old selves. But that's the past, and I've come to find out that time stops for no one, halts at nothing. Things grow, become complex. The sex is still simple though; we don't have it.

The Hawes, Geraldine and Rick, are nice folk, Christian folk. They have five kids, all too old now for a swingset. When we can afford it, me and Sarah eat out with them. Nothin' fancy, but she seems to enjoy it. Gives Sarah some conversation with another woman. Geraldine is probably the closest friend Sarah's got now. Personally, I think she's as stiff as her husband. Rick, he's one of those businessmen who wears cowboy hats and boots with their suits. He's always talkin' about what doesn't matter. Jerry Jones' Cowboys, oil prices. Things he thinks Texas is all about. But I hear 'em out usually, just chew on my bloody steak and nod my head. No need to add my two cents to that conversation.

I hope he's not there today when we go over. And I hope the swingset is free because really, how good of an investment is that? Money's tight with us and in a few blinks of an eye the kids will outgrow it and there it'd sit, untouched.

While I finish buttonin' my flannel I hear the kids runnin' around in the next room. Jess is screamin' at Hunter for hidin' her dolls—at least that's what I'm able to pick up from the sounds. He's always tryin' to push her buttons, and he's damn good at it. I hear Sarah raise her voice between Jess's screams, telling them to be quiet. Then I hear Lewis cry and Sarah tell Jess to give him back the Barbie.

Jess, she's the oldest. She's six and missin' a couple teeth now. Other than that, with me coming from an all boys household, I have no idea if Jess is on par with where girls are supposed to be at that age. She thinks boys are gross, which I hope is her mindset for life. I don't wanna picture her growing up, bringin' Mr. Right here to meet me and my 12-gauge. I guess I'll try to be nice to him when the day comes, but he's gotta make sure he knows how to love my Jess. I wish she'd never grow, wish she'd always like her Barbies. She looks like her mother, got the blonde hair and cute face. I thank and curse God for that every day. I've gotta teach her to protect herself soon, to fight off the peckers like me, like I was.

Hunter's just shy of four and a half and he already loves sports. He reminds me of the 'half' often. Can tell he's gonna be an athlete—throws a baseball damn near 50 feet, catches a football, with help from his chest. His hands aren't big enough yet. Kid shoots free throws already too, makes about three of ten. He reminds me of myself, a more successful model. I see him bein' a five-star recruit and goin' to some fancy college. Once he there's, he probably won't wanna come home, and that's a good thing.

"Get outta here. Go live," I think I'll tell him. I know he'll grow up to be able to handle himself in most situations, not needin' help from me or his mom.

Then there's Lewis. He's three and some change and named after my daddy. Not my daddy's first name but the middle. I regret pleadin' Sarah for that, on account he may turn out to be a faggot. See, my daddy was the gruffest son of a bitch I knew. He'd keep a dip in all day long, spice up his Diet Cokes with Beam every couple hours, even at the factory. When us kids, me and my brothers, would get outta line, after my mother left us, boy, you'd better watch it. Daddy'd grab for his noisy leather belts, make sure to take the longhorn buckle off so he wouldn't cut us or damage it.

When I think about it, maybe Lewis would play with the swingset longer. Might enjoy the way it feels on his ass, I think. I shake my head. I don't want to think that.

"It's mine!" Jess yells.

"Lewis wants to play with it though," Sarah tells her.

"Boys aren't supposed to play with dolls!"

Lewis cries until I assume Sarah rips the doll from Jess's hands and gives it to him. If I were out there I wouldn't even know what to say, how to handle them—I'd probably side with Jess.

When I finally do go out there it's for coffee. Sarah has all three kids sittin' around the card table we call our kitchen table, eatin' varieties of cereals, all knockoffs. I just sit there, see Lewis push his around, occasionally splashing milk onto his face and giggling. Goddamn, I think. Hunter laughs at him like I imagine many will throughout his life. Jess, still sour about the doll situation earlier, scowls at her brothers and slurps each spoonful down.

"Hunter, don't laugh at your brother," Sarah says. "Don't play with it, Lewis."

"Don't look at people like that, Jess," I tell her.

Jess drops her spoon. "They made me mad!"

"You can't show you're mad, honey, otherwise they'll keep doing it," I say.

"Finish up, guys, we're about to leave," Sarah tells them as I turn my attention to Lewis. I think about my daddy.

One time, right after I graduated high school he took me to a titty bar with him. He was probably around 50 at the time. Well, one young gun up front,

droolin' over the stage, stands up and starts to yell at this girl with a great ass dancin'. The bouncer, arms crossed, just laughs at the guy. So the young gun smiles and keeps at it. My daddy gets real pissed, mostly because it's hurtin' this chick's routine, so he stands up, tells me to stay there, and has a word with the young gun up front. I could only see their mouths movin', but apparently the young gun took offense to somethin' Daddy said so he gets up, inches away from my daddy's nose. The young gun was probably dumb before he started drinkin' but because alcohol raises it to 'nother level, my daddy put the guy in his place when he clocked 'em in the cheek with his right and sent 'em to the floor with his left. The bouncer didn't just smile, but laughed as he walked over to the young gun and dragged 'em out of the joint. My daddy just walked back to our table and watched the girl, who smiled at him and kept on. He never spoke to me about it, just gave me some singles to waste.

I know he's only three, but I can't see my Lewis ever doing something like that, can't see him ever steppin' foot in a straight bar, ever throwin' his fists in anger, or for a good reason. Shit, every man's gotta get in a fight at least once. Maybe he'd slap someone or gouge their eyes out with his touched-up nails. Who knows?

Maybe it's too early to say he's a queer, but I think there's evidence. The way he grabs for his sister's clothes, says "mine" as he puts them up to his little belly makes me curious. And the way he rejects the G.I. Joes and steals Jess's dolls. He has this one toy, I'm not sure what it's called, but it's this wooden rod with a square base at the bottom. Well, the point is to take the rings and put them in order, according to size, on the rod. Little Lewis takes all the rings off and strokes the rod like he was jerkin' it off. I leave the room every time I see it. And I imagine after I leave it gets worse. I picture Lewis trying to sit on the wooden rod. I picture Lewis goin' after Hunter with it, pokin' my boy's ass. I picture him stickin' the end of the rod in his mouth and cheekin' it every which way.

I remember fightin' to name him Lewis because Sarah had Lewis about two months after my daddy passed. Liver cancer, by God, took the bastard. I don't think Sarah ever liked the name Lewis, just felt it was somethin' she had to go along with because she knew how much I loved my daddy. I remember bein' told that marriage and relationships are all about compromise. But I think I chose the wrong thing to compromise for. I can't imagine what my daddy would think if he saw the kid. Can't imagine what he'd think when Lewis grew up to wear skinny jeans and scarves and peacoats and speak like some queer, lisp at the end of the drawl. I can't see Lewis ever lovin' a woman like you're supposed to, can't see him competin' for anything worthwhile.

Before we leave the Hawes', we have to take apart the swingset, which proves to be quite a bitch. It's mostly plastic, but the screws are all rusted so I need to use a lot of muscle to make any of them move. Sarah offers to help but I shake my head, a signal for her to go bitch and bicker with Geraldine. They don't think I can hear them but I can. It's always the same. "Bucky doesn't wanna," "Bucky says he doesn't need any help." I told Rick no, too when he walked out earlier and offered some help. He stayed there for a bit until I assume he thought the end of my conversation went dry. Started talkin' about Roger Staubach and Tom Landry again and I refused to comment. So I just sit there, crankin' away on the rusty bolts.

Eventually, I get it all apart and into the Bronco, no cracks in the plastic. These screws won't be able to hold up anymore though. With all the rust, they won't go back in without a hell of a fight. So instead of directly going to the Dickinsons' to pick up the kids, we go to the Abrams ranch so I can get the right bolts.

Mr. Abrams, my boss, loves me. I know he does. He doesn't say it. Nobody does around here. But he treats me better than his own son, Jackie. That didn't stop him from makin' Jackie his partner a few months back though. There's somethin' about legacy that no matter how much you like someone, you won't deny blood. I understood this when it happened a few years back, but Sarah didn't. When I told her she just sighed and started to cry, then asked what was gonna to happen to the house. We had already used Daddy's life insurance money through the factory to catch up on overdue payments on the mortgage. The money hadn't been much, but Daddy had split it between me and my brothers. A couple grand each was all. I'd tried to comfort Sarah by telling her I'd ask Mr. Abrams for advanced payment or a loan.

I'd expected a handout of some sort, something I wouldn't need to pay back. All I got from him was a pat on the back and a half-assed assurance that the ranch would pick up soon. See, since Mr. Abrams made Jackie partner, Jackie'd had a say in everything. Not that I'd felt I could do better (I couldn't say that to either of them, at least), but Jackie certainly didn't have a mind for decisions; a real flaky bastard. And I assume Mr. Abrams didn't have the heart to tell his son he was a failure of some sort. It's not what parents are supposed to do, not in today's world.

Jackie comes outta the house when we pull in. "What brings ya over today there, Bucky?" He's in sweatpants and a leather vest, beer in hand. He waves at Sarah still sitting in the passenger's seat.

What a prick, I think. Since I've known the guy he's had a thing for Sarah, always so friendly and complimentin' her about her hair. Even without the sex I find myself protective of her. "Grabbin' some bolts," I say, walking to the tool shed.

"What the hell for?"

"Swingset."

"That's gonna cost ya, Bucky," he says. He doesn't come in the toolshed but stands outside of the doorway. "Sarah doin' all right? She don't look too happy today."

"I'll pay for it on Monday," I say, hands full of bolts. I walk past him without givin' him so much as a glance and get in the Bronco and back out of the driveway, wishin' he was behind the bumper when I gunned it.

I think if Daddy were alive, he'd spit his tobacco juice on modern parenting, on kids that are coddled to the point of corruption. Day in, day out, I was a failure in his eyes. Chores were never done right, grades never good enough, decisions never the correct ones. There was one day, a Saturday, I think, where he was home and was workin' on the house. Touch-up work. My brothers were off on their bikes somewhere so my daddy told me to cut the lawn. He'd shown me how to operate the mower a few months before, but I'd never cut by myself. So bein' six or seven years old, once I started I made my own patterns. Cut circles in a rectangle of yellow, did zigzags in the kidney-shaped plot of dead grass before the gravel road. When I shut the mower off out front he walked from the east side of the house, hammer still in hand. He didn't say a word at first, just looked around the yard at my patterns. And as I got up from the seat, he took one hop and chucked the hammer at the mower like a tomahawk. The hammer put a giant dent in the hood of the mower.

"That's not how you fuckin' do it!" he yelled at me. "You need me to show you how to fuckin' do it? Christ, you've seen me do it hundreds o' times!"

If he were still alive today, he wouldn't admit this wasn't how it was supposed to work, raisin' your kids and all. And he shouldn't; no need to make excuses. But we'd laugh about it now, knowin' I learned from it.

I don't mind mowin' the lawn, not since then. I get to be alone, just me with the engine and the blades, real soothing but productive. Made some progress since that first time, I guess. So after Sarah and I actually agree the grass should be cut before I put the swingset together, I gas up the Ranch King and put in some 10W30. I spill a bit though so while it dries I walk around the yard and look for the kids' toys to pick up. I'm surprised there are none, but I stand upright and look at the property.

We bought the house when it had a solid brown finish. With Texas sun beatin' on it, it's since turned to a spotty tan, hardly consistent anywhere, not even where the shade stays for the majority of the day. The yards aren't big but they've faded to yellow. Not much we can do there. All the neighbors' yards are dry and crispy, too. Some have dogs though and where they shit is usually greener, but not so much I can tell from the hill where we have our

burning barrel. It's one of the only elevation changes in the neighborhood and I'm happy to have it. I've been meanin' to take my daddy's old bench he'd had on the porch, the one we moved into the house after he died, and put the bench on the hill. It's a good spot to sit, but I'd have to move the barrel to keep the smoke out of my throat and eyes. Me and Sarah used to sit there after we moved in, even fool around a bit there. We didn't care if anyone was watchin' us. My daddy and me sat there too, when he came over. Just sit on the grass in silence together. Watch the sun. Watch the stars, whatever. I'm gonna move it there soon, I convince myself.

Without the money from Mr. Abrams the house has stayed the same. I'd figured that after Sarah completed her RN program, we'd be done with hand-me-downs, finished with other people's junk, but I hadn't considered the loans Sarah'd taken out to put herself through. While her paychecks got sucked back into the system, my checks went to yard sales and pawnshops, to a rusted refrigerator and a couple battered rugs, to old VHS tapes for the kids, not DVDs, to charred frying pans and broken utensil racks. We kept the house clean most of the time though, takin' into consideration three kids. Sometimes clothes are scattered about: scrubs over my brother's old sofa, ratty, pre-owned Power Rangers T-shirts on the floor. Every once and a while I accidentally stomp on G.I. Joe's legs as I walk to my Bronco, but the kids were shown at an early age to keep their stuff out of the way. When I break a toy I immediately piece it back together.

I take some pride in the livin' room though, even if hand-me-downs dominate it. It's not a man cave but it's damn close. I take pride because it's not my own, but I put it together well. In the corner is a gun case I bought on layaway from Wal-Mart. It's about as tall as me, though it doesn't need to be. There's two guns in it: a 12-gauge to hunt geese and ducks and a 30.06 for deer, with iron sights. I don't get out as often as I used to. The one addition Sarah made to the room is an end table that sits between the sofa and the doorway to the only bathroom in the house. It matches the coffee table we picked up at our neighbors' yard sale. On the tables I keep commemorative coasters that were thrown in with the gun case. It shows a flock of geese taking off from a marsh. Above the sofa hang three racks of antlers, of bucks I'd taken down over a span of five years. There's a bear rug in front of the coffee table too. I didn't kill it though—given to me by a co-worker after his dog gnawed at its edges. But what brings the room together is somethin' I don't even use: Daddy's recliner. It's made of brown leather and permanently has his ass cheeks' imprints engrained into the seat. There's not a stain on it, but it was his drinkin' chair. It scares the shit out of me. When my brothers passed on it, I'd sat in the chair after we moved the last few things out of the house and immediately felt chills. I brought it home the next day. I've wanted to sit there for some time, maybe even take a nap. I just haven't had the courage.

"Now we just have to clean it up and it'll be ready to sell," Sarah told me a while back, referring to Daddy's house. She hops up on the kitchen table left by previous owners, her tits jiggling.

"Sell it?" I asked, chomping on jerky. "I don't wanna sell it."

Sarah studied my face. "We need the money—"

"I don't want to sell it," I interrupted. I wasn't thinkin' about the house. "It was his chair, Sarah."

Sarah jumped down from the table, adjusted her bra and walked out of the room in disgust, pouty and not wantin' to argue any further.

Maybe this is where we started to fall out. I'm not sure.

I like to line up the left tires with the furthest outlines of the yard as I mow so I don't shoot the burnt grass on the porch steps or in the gravel. I do this for the first two rounds, then switch so all the grass shoots to the right into the already mowed patches. The front yard doesn't take very long, about 20 minutes, max. On the east and west sides of the house are strips between our property and our neighbors', roughly two lawnmower widths, and I do the same routine for each, startin' with the east.

So I press the left side up to the side of the house as far as I can and turn to get close to the borders of the back yard. I pass by the slider door, where our kitchen is, to see Lewis sittin' Indian style on the linoleum, his face pressed to the glass, waitin' for me to pass. The first swipe, the closest, scares him a bit. I see his upper body sway back like he was going to be hit with something. He's never done this before, never sat there. Is he interested in me? Or the machine?

I continue and turn left to take the first swipe of the west side, then turn all the way around and push the left edge close to the neighbor's property and go all the way south, then right to come north and get the last strip on the east side. When I pass the slider once more Lewis is still there, gigglin', his legs crossed still. I make a face at him, cock my eyebrows and stick out my tongue until he giggles harder and slaps his knees. I never switch the pattern so the grass shoots his way when I go by, but he stays put, laughs at all of my faces. Open mouth, tongue dangling, tongue to the side, bulgin' eyes, whatever, he just laughs. How simple. One time Sarah walks by and stops in her tracks to laugh at me throwin' my head back and thrustin' my arms in the air to make Lewis laugh. She smiles for a long moment after. The first time I've seen her smile in a while.

I figure the swingset'll take no longer than an hour but I want to get it done so I go out to the garage and take it all out, piece by piece, from the Bronco and set it in the yard. Then I go back and grab my tools and the screws from the Bronco's cab. When I walk to the backyard, I realize we haven't decided where we are going to put it. After some time I decide where I want it and move the burning barrel to the east corner of the backyard. Then I put all the materials just in front of the small hill, where it flattens out again.

After I have the first tripod of the bars together and attach the long bar that extends to the other tripod, I hear the slider door open and watch the kids pour out. Jess runs around blowin' bubbles from a canister, the slight breeze shovin' them back into her bangs. She looks so innocent, so pretty. I want her to blow bubbles in this yard for life, but I know it won't happen. Hunter pushes two different Tonka trucks around, makes vroomin' noises with both. Maybe he'll want the Bronco when he's old enough, I think. Lewis is the last to walk through. I can see he has dolls in each of his hands, both of which have hair driftin' to the grass as he clomps his way over to me. He falls down about ten feet away and looks like he's gonna cry. I pick him up and brush the grass off of his diaper and set him down next to me at the swingset.

"I see you brought some help," I say, glancin' at the dolls and back at the screws I'm turnin' by hand.

He looks up at me, doesn't make a sound. I thought the screechin' of metal would startle him, but it doesn't, so I attach the second tripod to the overhead bar. When I tell him to move, he does so I can stand it up. By this point Jess and Hunter are interested so I have a crowd watchin' me as I attach the swing to the rings on the top bar. When it's on I push my hand on the seat, applyin' pressure to see how much it'll hold. It creaks but I think it'll hold up.

"Who's first?"

Jess runs up to the seat first and plops down. "Push me, Daddy," she says. I push her real slow and she giggles and giggles until Hunter gets jealous. "No, Hunter, it's not your turn yet," I tell him.

"No, Hunter it's not your turn yet," Jess repeats.

"Don't do that, Jess," I say.

When Hunter backs off I push Jess faster. Her back almost hits the small hill when she leans back to go to forward. I'll deal with that if the time comes, I think.

Hunter hops in and I push him for a bit. But when Jess runs off with her bubbles, Hunter chases her, actin' like the Tonka trucks are gonna run her over. Lewis walks up to the swing and tries to get in, but can't all by himself. So I lift him into it and push real light. He wants to take his hands off the plastic covers over the chains, so I wrap my hands around his and run with the swing. He loves it. Every few seconds he looks up at me with a smile that makes me smile.

Eventually Jess and Hunter go back in the house and it's just me and Lewis. I take him off the swing and set him next to me on the hill behind the swing, where he grabs the dolls. He gives me one.

"What's her name?" I ask, sighing.

Lewis answers but I don't understand his babble, feel like he tried to say "mommy." I ask him about the other one and he says what I interpret as "sissv."

"Where am I?" I ask.

Lewis doesn't answer, kind of shrugs his shoulders.

"Where am I?" I repeat out loud, but not to him. Where am I?

Lewis has only had one haircut before that I can remember so when I put my hand on his black hair it feels like real soft fur, like I imagine the dead bear's fur felt like before it ended up on our living room floor.

"You tired?" I ask him, then help him to his feet.

We walk hand-in-hand to the house where I open the slider door, grab a beer, and prop him on my lap in Daddy's chair. I don't feel chills. Whether it's finding comfort or the sweat that's still on my skin, I don't know. I scoot over so his butt can rest between the arm of the chair and my right hip and we both kind of doze off. Before I fall asleep I think I hear Sarah ask where Lewis is.

"Right here," I say, twitchin' my nose, refusin' to open my eyes. Part of me wants to tell her more, tell her about Lewis and the swingset, the dolls. But I don't.

She says no more and I imagine she smiles as she walks out, like she did at me in the yard. I imagine her being proud of me and maybe rewarding me with sex. I imagine she saw me here, in this chair, so comfortable for once with my son, and decided whatever else she had to say could wait.