

THE HANDYMAN METHOD

A NOVEL



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THERE'S A SECRET AT the heart of every marriage.

The thought hit Trent Saban without warning as he pulled up to the new house. He didn't consider it an omen, but he did wish his brain—that malignant turd in the punchbowl socked between his ears—hadn't conjured it at the moment he first set eyes on the place.

He reached across the armrest and squeezed Rita's thigh. "We're here."

"Yup," his wife said. "Thar she blows."

Trent reeled his hand back with an audible exhale. The Toyota Sienna idled under a broiling midday sun. The house filled the windshield. The tempered glass magnified it somehow, dragging their new home closer to them.

"That's it, huh?" came Milo's voice from the backseat.

Their son threw the rear door open and strode parallel to the driver's-side door. He planted his hands on his hips with an exaggerated squint, a pint-sized foreman assessing a construction site.

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“It sure is big.”

Trent got out beside the boy and stretched. The shadow of the house’s roof touched the tips of his loafers. The driveway gave way to hard-packed yellow dirt that fanned out to every point on the compass. There was no sidewalk. Trent knew he shouldn’t have expected one, but still, its lack bugged him . . .

. . . and where in blue fuck was his grass?

“It’s going to be awesome, big guy,” he said, rallying. “Build you a playset right over there, or there . . . or, uh, there. Lots of room.”

Milo notched his glasses up his nose. “*You’re* gonna build it?”

The skin tightened up Trent’s spine. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I?”

Rita hadn’t gotten out. Trent rapped on the windshield. When this earned no response, he rubbed his jaw, scissoring the bones side to side.

“Wait here,” he told Milo. He walked up the drive flanking the garage to the front door. A plastic placard dangled from the knob:

Welcome to Dunsany Estates
Welcome Home!

Trent snapped it off and flipped it over his shoulder. He slid the key in and turned the knob but only let the door fall open a scant inch, not wanting to spoil the surprise.

“Let’s *do* this!” he said, jogging back to the Sienna. “We’ll go in together as a—”

The wind gusted, flinging grit in Trent’s face. With a dread premonition, he turned just in time to see the front door blow open, banging lustily on its hinges.

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The placard lifted off the flagstones with a whippy *thwip!*; it cartwheeled up the steps and zephyred merrily inside the house.

“Shit.”

Milo was standing back at the Sienna. He’d fetched his turtle, Morty, from his tank in the backseat. “Were you saying something, Dad?”

“Door’s open,” Trent told him flatly.

Cradling Morty protectively to his belly button, Milo dashed up the drive.

“Take your shoes off, kiddo!” Trent called. “And don’t be dripping salmonella water all over the floor!”

Rita was still rooted in the passenger seat. The hell was her problem? At times like this, Trent imagined a trick zipper at the back of his dear wife’s head. He saw himself gripping the pull-tab and peeling the teeth of that zipper open, *pok-pok-pok . . .*

What’s the weather like inside that beautiful skull of yours, baby? It bothered Trent not to know, not to have a friggin’ clue. *What storms are brewing in that swirling cumulus?*

Ah, but did anyone want to know what their partner was really thinking? Take today, for instance, on the drive in. They’d stopped for gas, Rita and Milo heading into the convenience store for snacks, leaving Trent alone at the pumps. A train had been rumbling down the tracks behind the station. Trent pictured himself dashing up the berm and leaping onto a passing railcar. Ditching his wallet on the minivan hood and hightailing it with nothing but the clothes on his back, embracing a new life of adventure with mischievous hobos, scamps, and cutpurses . . . This unbidden daydream had filled him with the joy that a ground-bound bird must feel, were it miraculously to take flight.

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Trent knuckle-rapped the windshield, harder this time. “I see Hector’s on his way, hon. Come on, now, be friendly.”

Rita stepped out and drew a jumpy breath. The wind purred along the earth, as if gusting across a vast lake. Trent watched earwax-colored dirt sift over the toes of Rita’s Dior oxfords. . . .

They turned from the house to chart Hector’s pickup as it jounced toward them, lifting a rooster-tail of dust. It came through nothingness: no houses, no trees, no street signs or signs of life. The outlines of the neighboring development were barely visible to the south: Trent could just make out the roofs of the nearest houses, a fuzzy sawtooth against the horizon.

The Sabans’ new home sat in moody isolation, a single unit in an otherwise uninhabited vista. Oh, there was the odd foundation sunk forlornly in the dirt; the skeletal suggestion of a frame rose from a few of them. But Trent could fire a shotgun—hell, a bazooka—and the blast would go unheard by human ears.