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Breakfast of Champions

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“Goddammit!” Bruce shouts as he drops the cup of scalding coffee into his lap. He doesn’t think; he reacts. Struggling to stand on the artificial legs attached to the stumps of his thighs, he knocks his chair over. The ceramic cup shatters when it hits the tile floor. Holding the table edge with his left hand, he slaps with his right to extinguish the fire his brain insists is burning his privates. “Aw shit,” he gasps, when his latex-covered, metal hand hammers his testicles.

Bruce loses his balance and his grip on the table when he bends, attempting to ease the pain in his crotch. He sways and fights to stay upright, but falls forward. His forehead slams into his plate. Pieces of the plate, and the remnants of his breakfast, follow him to the floor. Shards of glass embed in the palm of the hand he puts down to protect himself from hitting the tile too hard.

“Fuck!”

“Daddy?” Two young, shocked voices speak in unison.

“Little pitchers,” Nancy says in a sharp tone.

“Don’t hold your breath waiting for an apology,” he shouts, “Can’t you see I’m hurt?”

“I see embarrassment. I see shame. I see anger. I don’t see much hurt.”

Bruce turns his head away from his wife’s glare, but his brain still reels from the assault of her hard stare. His grunts of exasperation and disgust are loud, as he worms his way to his fallen chair and struggles to rise. It won’t support him; he succeeds only in pushing it further across the floor. The screeching sounds of the chair grating across the tile are magnified by his hearing aids. He grimaces and shakes his head.

“I could use a little help here.” His tone reflects his mixed feelings. No one gets up. Shaking
with anger, he looks at the three sitting at the table.

“Michael, finish your breakfast.” Nancy’s words are slow, quiet, and carefully enunciated. “Lisa, quit staring at your dad and drink your juice; you’ll miss the bus. Michael, plan on riding the bus today too. Don’t ever let me hear either of you using foul language like that.” Nancy is using her I’m The Mom voice. The kids don’t reply, discuss, argue, or equivocate. In the silence, broken only by the tick-tocking from the clock on the wall, Bruce’s hearing aids magnify the crunch of Nancy biting into a slice of toast.

“Did you hear me say I needed some help?” He doesn’t hide his fury and indignation.

“Yes, and you’re not getting any.”

Bruce shouts another obscenity. Lisa begins sobbing. Michael yells, “Dad!” Chair legs scrape the tile, and his daughter runs out of the dining room. His son hesitates before following; the expression on his face freezes Bruce’s heart. He hears another crunch. Nancy chews and swallows before speaking again.

“Did that make you feel good, big guy? Are you finished with your tantrum? What exactly did you expect? You’ve made it clear, ever since they brought you back from Afghanistan, you don’t want help from anybody. That first day at Walter Reed, when I tried to change your colostomy bag—you yelling, ‘I can do it myself.’ And, every day since. You swat our hands away when we try to help. We’re not allowed to bring you so much as a glass of water or the newspaper. You’ve made it plain we’re not wanted nor needed. Now, you expect help?”

There’s another crunch and more chewing. Bruce’s head is raised to maintain eye contact, but Nancy won’t look at him. She concentrates on her plate. He rests his head on the tile, while he adjusts the patch over his empty eye socket. The heavy scarring on his face makes it difficult to keep it in place. His left eye searches for cobwebs and patterns on the ceiling, while he waits for
his anger to dissipate. After a few minutes, he sighs, which seems to be a signal for her to continue.

“The kids and I don’t need any more of your macho bullshit; your feeling sorry for yourself then taking it out on us. If you want me to check your hand before I go to work, come over here. Or, you can ask the school nurse to look at it. If you’re just going to push that chair around the floor all day, you probably ought to take that cell-phone out of your pocket, call the principal, and tell her she’ll need a substitute History teacher.”

Bruce breathes deeply and sighs louder. “Pride,” he whispers. He examines his left hand and uses the mechanical fingers of the other to remove several shards of broken coffee cup from his palm. The cuts are minor; there’s only a few drops of blood. He scooches and rolls closer to Nancy’s chair. “If you’ll stay there, your weight will hold your chair still while I use it to get up.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The kids return as he pulls himself upright. “Did you two brush your teeth?” They nod. “Good. I’m going to clean up this mess and change my pants. Mike, I’ll be late for first period, so please take the bus today. I apologize to all of you for my language and anger. It was my fault none of you wanted to help me. Let’s talk about it tonight. Could I have a hug, please?”

“They both were smiling,” Nancy says, when the front door closes. “I think they appreciated how you handled that. I sure did.”

Bruce dumps the dustpan full of breakfast mess into the trash can. “I’m an ass.”

“Yes, you are.” Nancy stands, and strokes his shoulder. “I’m pregnant.”

“Holy shit! Can I tell everybody?”

“Why not? They’ll see it for themselves soon enough.” Nancy hugs him. Her grin matches his. “Why don’t you call in for that sub and I’ll call in sick, too. I could use a mental
health day.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bruce mimics the tone and inflection Nancy used earlier. “You can help me take off these pants.”

“Only if you ask nicely.”

“Please.”

“That’s a good start, Champ, I’ll meet you in the bedroom.”