

Mancave



Caveman

Fanny Wickström

The desire to create our own spaces starts at a very young age. Almost as soon as we were able to walk we were draping sheets over chairs for an indoor hideout or leaning sticks against a fence for a backyard fort. Tree houses came later with help from dad, who no doubt considered making the platform strong enough to hold him, too. In fact, it might be that these childhood experiences are what make it so hard for grown men to accept not having much more room than the hall closet.

(Sam Martin, *Manspace: A primal guide to marking your territory*, 2006)

1.

It was 600 square feet. Not too big and not too small. It was a windowless basement with concrete floor and wood panel walls. If you closed your eyes you could envision the things that had been built in there over the years, generations of men with a mission. A mission of wood, sawdust, hammers and nails. A mission to create and to penetrate. But that was not what Jack was envisioning at that moment. He was thinking about a 52 inch flat screen TV mounted on the wall, a pool table and maybe even a bar. *A place of my own.* With an absent minded smile he gently caressed the football in his hands and felt the leather where he knew the autograph was.

Laura had made pasta for dinner that night. Something with chicken breast, white wine and asparagus, but Jack didn't really notice what he was eating until his wife asked him if he liked it.

– Oh, it's great honey, definitely. Sorry I was just thinking about fixing up the basement, like we talked about. We don't really need it for storage right now and it would be such a good place for me when I have people over. He reached across the dining table and touched her hand.

– You won't ever have to lay eyes on my cigar box collection again. And that recliner that you hate so much will be out of the living room for good! His wife laughed at his enthusiasm, squeezed his hand back and looked around at the towers of moving boxes.

– Sure, as long as you don't utter a word about my choice of wall paper in here.

Jack couldn't fall asleep. Whatever position he tried, he wasn't able to get comfortable. His wife had been asleep for over an hour but he was restless. There were so many things that had to be done and he wanted to take care of them right away. He tried to make a mental list of things to buy to clear his head. *A shelf for the football and the trophy I won in eighth grade, something for the walls, a rug (is bear skin taking it too far?), a juke box perhaps (definitely too far).* The list didn't help at all since there seemed to be no end to it so Jack snuck out of bed as quietly as

he could to not wake his wife up, and tip toed down to the basement. He sat down in his recliner that he'd brought down after dinner and looked around the naked room. He immediately experienced a sense of peace and fell asleep.

He couldn't believe that he was stuck in traffic. To beat rush hour Jack had left the office an hour early with a doctor's appointment as an excuse, but now he was sitting here and the long line of cars seemed to be standing completely still. His neck felt stiff from last night's sleeping in the recliner and he was sweating. He took his jacket off and loosened his tie but was still uncomfortable. He checked the time. The e-bay auction would end in an hour and he had to get home before then. When leaving the office he was still the highest bidder but that could change quickly. He quietly cursed his iphone and the bars searching for connection to the internet. He had been waiting for months for an autographed Jay Cutler jersey to appear and couldn't miss out on this opportunity. Although the jersey would never be quite as valued to Jack as the football he felt like he desperately needed it in his future collection of sports memorabilia. The memory of the trip down to Texas last year to watch the Chicago Bears play the Dallas Cowboys still awoke a feeling of excitement in him. The game itself had exceeded his expectations but the real payoff came the morning he was checking out of the Hilton and saw Cutler standing there in the lobby, talking to someone at the front desk. Jack had been in a hurry but still managed to build up the courage and walk up to talk to him. The quarterback had appeared even taller in reality, but his eyes were friendly and he didn't seem annoyed when Jack approached him. He even took a moment to chat after signing the ball, as if they were real buddies, although Jack had felt embarrassed that he hadn't come up with anything witty to say, talking about his mind numbing office job would hardly impress a sports star.

The street light switched from red to green and he was on his way. Fortunately there were no police cars around because he was going almost fifteen miles over the speed limit all the way home and made it with only ten minutes left of the auction. Jack hurried into

the house and almost ran into his wife, who tried to greet him at the door, on his way up to the study where his computer was. His bid was still leading.

It was Saturday and Jack and Laura had decided to stay at home together to get some things done around the house. Jack was impressed by how much fixing up Laura had already taken care of in the short week since they moved in, *but if one doesn't have to spend eight hours a day in an office there are oceans of time*. He was surprised by the slight feeling of jealousy, but quickly pushed it aside for more urgent matters. He went to find his wife who was busy putting up a curtain rod in the living room. He helped her hold up the rod while she was standing on a chair drilling holes in the wall.

– Honey, he interrupted her when she was in the middle of describing a specific shade of egg shell that would look great in the kitchen, you know that spare fridge we have sitting in the basement? I was thinking about turning that into a kegerator, it would save me so much hassle compared to putting in a bar down there.

– I guess we never use it, but were you actually planning on building a bar, isn't that a bit too much work? By the way, how do you feel about driving out to Ikea today, they have a really beautiful couch which would go well with these curtains? Jack was already annoyed by her comment about the bar and didn't feel like going anywhere.

– Not today. You can go if you want to but I might start on the kegerator, I found a CO2 cylinder on my way home from work the other day.

– If you already made up your mind, then why did you even bother to ask me about it?

Despite the fact that it was only Tuesday, mr Callahan suggested that they'd all go out for dinner and drinks after work, on the company credit card of course, to celebrate the past couple of weeks excellent sales. They decided on one of the better steak houses in town which also happened to be located close to the office. Once there Jack ordered a glass of cabernet sauvignon while trying to decide what to eat.

– How is the new house coming together? Eric, one of his co-workers, asked him.

– It’s going great, Laura is taking care of most of it and lets me focus on the basement.

– The basement? Sarah, another co-worker, asked with an amused look on her face.

– Yeah, haven’t you heard that Jack is making himself a mancave, Eric said and laughed. Jack blushed, and although he knew that Eric’s laughter meant well he still felt somewhat insulted.

– Oh, I see, Sarah continued, it’s an all boys thing right? You’ll sit down there and drink beer and talk about sports and pretty girls?

Jack didn’t want Sarah to notice that this was a touchy subject for him (he honestly wasn’t sure why it even *was*), and just played along.

– Of course, no women allowed, if you spill something on the floor it stays there and please use only one-syllable words. Everyone at the table laughed (*with him*, he was certain) and he felt he did well.

And Sarah is single and has her entire apartment to herself, she doesn’t understand anyway.

– I’m looking forward to come over and have a look when you’re done man, Eric said.

Jack responded as enthusiastically as he could, explained that it might take a couple of months before everything was in order, but after that, of course. Even though he wasn’t really keen on inviting anyone down to his basement.

He put the last mahogany veneer shelf on the brackets and rested the spirit level on it. He was relieved to see that this one was as perfectly mounted as all the rest of them. The basement was slowly getting in order. Despite the fact that he hadn’t made any real progress on the kegerator during the week he was happy with himself. The TV wasn’t as big as he had wanted and it was placed on a bench instead of on the wall, but the upside was that now he had somewhere to put his playstation. Jack went over to the liquor cabinet Laura’s dad had given them as a wedding gift, which, unlike the shelves, was real mahogany. It was still empty but he grabbed a beer from the ice bucket next to it. On the other side of the room Al Pacino was looking down

at him from the wall with a machine gun in his hand. *Say hello to my little friend.* Jack had a sip of beer, picked up a dart from the floor and aimed it at the board. No bulls eye. He decided to get back to work and opened one of the moving boxes on the floor and started unpacking his cigar boxes. Some of his friends found it strange that a person who didn't even like cigars would collect the boxes, but they never said anything since he generously offered them whenever he had people over. He had so many boxes now and realized that he'd have to stack some of them to have room for anything else on the shelves. Although, the really rare ones had to stand upright with the labels facing the room. He reached for one of his absolute favorites, opened it and touched the inside. The fabric felt so soft against his fingers. He started breathing heavily, let his hand slide down to his crotch and realized that he had an erection. He could hear Laura's steps in the living room above him and couldn't remember the last time they had had sex. He carefully put the cigar box on the shelf and walked up the stairs. He found Laura in the kitchen with her back turned to him, cutting up a honey dew melon. Jack walked up to her, embraced her from behind and gently took the knife from her hand and put it down. His wife giggled.

– What are you doing honey?

Instead of responding he turned her around and started kissing first her neck and then her lips, while sliding one hand inside her blouse to caress her breast. Laura hungrily kissed him back and started unzipping his pants. Jack directed her toward the kitchen table, reached underneath her skirt and pulled down her underwear, and they proceeded to fuck on the table. Jack didn't usually fuck his wife on the kitchen table in the middle of the day and it came as a surprise to both of them. He felt proud of himself, he had shown initiative worthy of a porn star, but deep within he had a nagging sense of shame.

Jack was in the basement busy trying to figure out where in the fridge door to drill the hole for the beer tap. All the small bits and pieces that were meant to go into the kegerator made him nervous since he'd never been especially good at building things. He suddenly heard the sound of the doorbell and remembered that Laura was

out running errands. He left the basement to answer the door and almost jumped with joy when he saw the Fedex logo on the man's jacket, and the big package he was holding. Jack had paid extra to get the jersey delivered as soon as possible but despite that he had waited two weeks for it. He impatiently signed the slip, thanked the delivery man and started ripping the package open as soon as he'd closed the door. He wished he could touch it but since it was behind glass he could only imagine what the dark blue fabric, with the number six in white and orange, would feel like.

He returned to the basement and spent a good hour on trying to figure out exactly where to hang the jersey, he felt it needed some space to come into its own. Finally Jack ended up hanging it in the middle of the still naked wall in the far end of the basement, that way he could see it whenever he was positioned in the recliner. He poured himself a glass of Jack Daniels from the liquor cabinet that was now nearly fully stocked and sat down to admire his new acquisition. But something was wrong. The excitement he had felt waiting for the package to come was slowly fading away and was replaced by something resembling disappointment.

2.

He had probably been about five years old, it must have been winter because he remembered having a snowball fight with his sisters in front of their house. When they came back inside the game had already started and his parents were sitting on the couch. Jack noticed to his delight that the entire coffee table was filled with all kinds of snacks and sodas and he recalled being happy because everyone was at home together and in a good mood. Even though he wasn't completely aware of what Super Bowl was, he knew that it was a big deal, because, as his mother had explained it to him a few days earlier, *we* were playing this time. Jack climbed up into the couch and positioned himself close to his mother.

– Mommy, can I have a coke? he asked.

Without responding his mother opened a bottle of soda and handed it to him, with her eyes still fixed on the television screen.

– Mommy, who is that? Jack pointed to the man on the screen.

– That's Jim McMahon honey, he's a quarterback and he's going to win this game for us, you'll see. Jack didn't care who the man was since he didn't even really like football as a child, and had to try something different to get his mother's attention.

– Mommy, do you want to see the drawing I made in school?

– Not now, the game is on. If you can't be quiet, why don't you go outside to play some more.

It was close to ten when he entered the office, which meant he was almost an hour late. He tried to go about it unnoticed and pretend that everything was in order, but the receptionist immediately saw him, and with a concerned look on her face asked why he was not attending the meeting that had started half an hour earlier. The truth was that Jack had completely forgotten about it, and he couldn't really tell her that he'd been so busy painting the wall on which the framed jersey was hanging that the idea of coming in to the office had simply slipped his mind, until his wife had come down to the basement and reminded (*reprimanded*) him. Instead of joining the meeting Jack sat down at his desk and went on e-bay to check on the auction of a

vintage slot machine he was currently bidding on. He justified it to himself as it was better to do it in the morning instead of putting it off and spending the day thinking about it, so for efficiency's sake he killed the two hours before lunch by surfing the internet. He didn't realize how much time had passed until his colleagues started coming out of the meeting room. Dave, who was in the cubicle next to Jack's, walked up to him.

– Hey man, where were you this morning? We went over all the details for next week, it would have been good to have had your numbers in there. He glanced at Jack and continued with a smirk.

– And you're rather casual looking today, it's not even Friday.

Jack looked down and realized he was still wearing the t-shirt he put on yesterday morning before calling in sick, and that his denim jeans were smeared with paint. He didn't know what to respond but was utterly relieved that he had forgotten about the meeting, his boss wouldn't appreciate him taking liberties with the office dress code.

– If you don't mind, I have some things to take care of now.

He opened a work related document on his computer and pretended to be busy to make Dave disappear from his sight.

Laura was in the kitchen putting on some more coffee. They had just had breakfast together. Jack gazed at his wristwatch, it was almost eight thirty which meant he really should get going if he didn't want to be late for work. He felt his forehead, wasn't it a bit hot? His throat felt sore as well, maybe it was better to stay at home today, in case he was coming down with something. But didn't he skip work two days ago, to go to Chicago and look for the perfect side table? Perhaps he did, but his wife didn't know that after all. He touched the egg cup in front of him, the hard hollow plastic reminded him of something. The smooth rounded surface made him think of childhood. *His older sister's room. Maybe he was four, sneaking in there when she was at school. The Barbie with a hollow belly that you could open up by spinning it around to reveal a small plastic baby in there. The slight movement of his hand could make the baby visible and then disappear again.* He suddenly remembered one time when he stole the small plastic baby and put it in the trunk of his toy car. The embarrassment he felt by the memory of his sister finding

it and telling his mother was as strong as though it had happened yesterday. He decided that he was definitely unfit for work today.

He opened the front door and managed to carry the heavy rolled up rug inside without dropping it. *It will really tie the room together*, he thought to himself, *make it warmer and more cozy*. He dragged the rug through the hallway and noticed that the door to the stairs leading down to the basement was open. Jack let the roll fall to the floor and walked down the stairs. He was not very pleased to see his wife with her back towards him, going through his remaining moving boxes. As far as he knew she never came down here when he was not in. She turned around with an awkward expression on her face when she heard him come in.

– What are you doing in here? he asked, sounding a bit more hostile than intended.

– I just came down to look for you, I didn't hear you leave. Although Jack had forgotten to say goodbye before leaving earlier he suspected that she was lying to him.

– And honey, why do you keep almost all of my recent issues of Elle Decor in this box, it looks like you tried to hide them under this Sports Illustrated. Jack had brought them down a couple of days before, to see if he could get some inspiration for the three walls that were still unpainted, but he had meant to bring them right back and he didn't even remember how they ended up in the moving box.

– Oh, I don't know, I must have accidentally packed them there when we were moving, he lied and hoped she wouldn't notice that the latest issues was no more than a week old. He wasn't even sure why he couldn't just tell her the truth. She looked worried and asked him how he felt, he had seemed so withdrawn lately, of course she was happy that he'd found a hobby but perhaps they could spend some more time together, maybe even go away somewhere over a weekend, what did he think about that? Jack muttered that he was fine but rather busy at the moment. He had already lost focus and begun thinking about where exactly to place the rug for the best effect.

Jack felt uneasy about leaving the basement at a time like this but he desperately had to use the bathroom so there was no way around it. She had people over. As he climbed the stairs as quietly as he could he heard them laugh and talk in tipsy voices. Jack had to pass through the living room where they were seated to reach the bathroom. *As long as they don't ask anything.* When entering the living room he tried to make his face look as busy and unresponsive as possible to avoid confrontation, but it was all in vain.

– Jack, honey! Come say hello, you remember the girls of course, and here's Catherine, she lives two doors down, in the house with those lovely roses in the garden. And this is Suzy, the blue house across the street you know. Her husband Pete is a surgeon!

Jack swallowed nervously, mumbled something that sounded like hello and shook the hands of the two new women. He was suddenly very aware of the fact that he hadn't shaved in three days and had big stain of spaghetti sauce on the front of his shirt. Laura definitely noticed and gave him a look of discontent. He was unsure of what to do with the situation and solved it by hurrying to the bathroom. Through the door he could hear her explain that he was under a lot of stress at work and his boss had put more pressure on him lately, she sounded embarrassed but was reassured by her friends that all he needed was probably some space. Jack looked at himself in the mirror. His face looked different somehow. He *felt* different as well. But he knew there was nothing he could say to her to make her understand, since he didn't even understand himself.

To avoid confrontation Jack had, without even thinking about it, started avoiding his wife. It wasn't as if he was deliberately *trying* to disappoint her, he simply forgot to do certain things. Or perhaps he just didn't find them that important anymore. Did he necessarily *need* to wear a shirt and tie to work everyday? That is, everyday he actually went to work. The first couple of times Jack had called in sick he had felt bad for lying but he found that it gradually became more natural and his excuses got more creative. He didn't dislike his job, or at least he didn't use to, but he often felt that there was something really important that he had to take care of in the basement, something

that couldn't be put off an entire day. And he had plenty of capable colleagues that could manage whatever had to be done around the office. He suddenly remembered that he'd actually forgotten to even call the office today. Laura had told him that she would be away for the day and that had made him so relieved that everything else had slipped his mind. Right at this moment Jack was avoiding dinner. Although he knew that she would knock on the door and, in an even more impatient way, tell him to please come upstairs a second (and possibly even a third) time, he hoped she would just give up and leave him alone. He had had three Snickers bars, but that wasn't really the issue. She had just been so angry and disappointed lately. He didn't want to hear her scream anymore and it was as if she didn't understand that the work in the basement was equally important as other things. He felt tired and decided that it was time for a nap.

– I'm not your mother for god's sake! she yelled, walked up the stairs and slammed the door shut. Laura was right. She was not Jack's mother. In fact she was, if not the opposite, very different. Jack loved his mother dearly and was grateful to her for everything she had done for him and his sisters. Especially after his father had lost his job when Jack was a child and she had had to support the entire family for a number of years. As an adult, with a demanding job of his own, he realized how stressful it must have been for her to be responsible for the whole family with only one income. With all that pressure it was totally understandable that his mother often didn't have time to help him with his school work, take him to the park or read to him before he went to bed. It was also understandable that she sometimes had to take her frustration out on his father. Like that time when they had a couple of friends over for dinner and his parents got into an argument over money and his mother had called his father useless. Or was it perhaps *a no good piece of crap*? Jack didn't remember the details, but now, as an adult, he didn't blame his mother for that. He understood. He shook the thoughts of his mother out of his head and tried to recall why Laura had just yelled at him. Was there something he should apologize for? He didn't remember doing anything wrong so instead of running after his wife he went back to trying to figure

out if he should move the recliner back into the corner where it was before, or leave it out closer to the middle of the room.

Jack was suddenly aware that he held something in his hand, opened it, and saw to his surprise that it was a lighter. That is weird, he thought to himself, since he didn't usually smoke. He figured it might be a sign and decided that he should have a cigar, it might be a nice way to celebrate the progress he had made so far. He walked up to the shelves and picked out a cigar box, not the most expensive but still fancy enough. Jack opened the box and discovered that it wasn't filled with cigars at all, but with severed penises neatly arranged in a row. He was surprised by the lack of disgust he felt for the misplaced body parts, and simply put the box away to have a look in the others. The next three boxes he opened had the same morbid content as the first and he quickly grew tired of trying to find a cigar. He was wondering whether he should tell his wife or not when he noticed that the trophy was no longer where it should be on the shelf, but had mystically been replaced by a leg, severed right below the knee and turned upside down, standing with the sole of the foot facing upward, in a way still resembling the trophy. He turned around and saw his father standing next to him.

– Go on son, he said, have a cigar, don't be afraid. Jack didn't respond and suddenly his father's voice turned into that of his wife and he woke up from his dream. Someone was shaking him.

– The floor Jack?! Are you sleeping on the floor now? How many nights in a row have you been down here? What's wrong with you, and what the hell is wrong with our bed upstairs?

Jack was confused and wasn't exactly sure why she was yelling at him in such a hostile way, but instinctually felt that she wouldn't appreciate an honest answer (not that he could remember *precisely* how many nights he'd spent down here the past couple of weeks, and since he usually managed to sneak back up again before she woke up, she'd had no reason to suspect anything) and lied.

– Eh, two?

– You are lying to me! I've heard you come up in the mornings but I didn't want to say anything because I thought it was just a phase, that

it would return to normal. But this is enough! You're sleeping on the floor like an animal and the reason I even came down was because Mr Callahan just called and wondered why you hadn't showed up at the office in a week. A week! What have you been doing during the days? Are you seeing someone Jack, is that what it is? Are you on drugs?

The look on her face had changed from enraged to desperate, and Jack racked his brain for something to say, even something to feel but he was completely blank. He pondered whether she would prefer him cheating or doing drugs but he couldn't keep his line of thought straight. He glanced over to the nearly finished kegerator, *perhaps today was the day when he'd be able to finish it.*

– Yes... was the only answer he could come up with.

– Yes what?!

Jack had no idea what to respond to that, he was hungry. Starving in fact. He rolled over on his side and curled up into a fetal position, turned away from her. He could hear her crying and part of him felt like crying too, but maybe it was better this way.

– I'm going over to my sister in Connecticut, she said, don't try to call me unless you've pulled yourself together again.

Her pause suggested that she was waiting for him to say something but when he didn't she just turned away from him and ran up the stairs. Half an hour later when the front door slammed shut Jack was still on the floor in the same position.

3.

On all fours he made his way over to the liquor cabinet. The rough floor had long ago torn holes in his now grayish brown slacks and his knees were bleeding. Not sure of what he was trying to accomplish he still had an urgent feeling that he had to get there. The doors were open and apart from some pieces of shattered glass the cabinet was empty. Jack reached out and touched the mirrored inside. His hand got sticky from old whiskey and coke and he greedily licked his fingers, the sweet yet sharp taste of alcohol seemed foreign and familiar at the same time, almost dreamlike. With his index finger still in his mouth he curiously peeked into the cabinet. There was a face in there. A face with hair on it, two eyes, one nose and a mouth with a finger in it. Without taking his eyes off of the two eyes, one nose and the mouth that still had the finger in it, Jack took his own finger out of his mouth to once again taste the sweet, sharp and sticky and noticed to his surprise that the finger inside the cabinet also pulled out of the mouth. He forgot about the taste of the sweet and sharp and ducked out of sight.

The cave felt smaller now. As if the walls had closed in on him, but not in a way that was threatening. It felt safer like this, more comfortable, like the walls were where they actually should have been all along. As if the natural order of things had been restored.

He held the football in his hands and looked at the words that were written on it. He no longer remembered what they meant. He held it up and dropped it to the floor to see if it would bounce back to him. It didn't. He tried again but this time a bit harder which made the ball roll away from him and end up in a corner next to a pile of dusty cigar boxes. Jack didn't feel like crawling across the room to get it back so he just left it there. He lay down on the cushions from the recliner that were now arranged as a mattress on the floor and gazed up at the ceiling.

Strong arms lifted him out of the crib and held him close to what was rightfully his and let him suck on it until he was satisfied. It was as though he was taking and giving at the same time, like the circle had been closed and he knew he would never have to give it up. Would it even be there if it wasn't for him? What would it do and who would it give to?

Jack crept across the room toward the old fridge that would never become a kegerator. It was rather difficult for him to hold on to the blanket in his right hand while crawling and he had to move slowly to keep from dropping it. He finally reached his goal and held out a hand to touch the smooth surface of the fridge. I felt almost warm since it hadn't been plugged in for a long time. Jack tried to push it over, gently at first with one hand on the side of it and the other hand still on the floor for support. But the thing wouldn't budge an inch so he had to try with both hands. Jack pushed it as hard as he possibly could and suddenly it tipped over and crashed down loudly on the concrete floor. He almost fell over with it but was able to regain his balance. The door of the fridge had opened when it fell and Jack used the hand that was not supporting his body to put the dirty blanket in there and arrange it in a comfortable way the best he could. The idea that he might not fit in there didn't even cross his mind and he began to climb in. First the hands, then arms and shoulders. He tried to make himself as small as possible and curled up to make his legs fit. The tight space comforted him, made him feel secure and contained and it wasn't long before he was asleep.

He was swimming. The water was warm, as warm as his own body temperature, and he felt like a fish, as if he belonged in the water. The waves were gentle, rocking him back and forth and he wasn't afraid to slip down below the surface, into the darkness. It was as if he could breathe under water, or didn't need to breathe at all, and he swam deeper down.

