

Coffee Talk: Two Sugars One Life

The Christmas Kitchen

Clayton M. Myhill

November 2025

“Assembly time: 20 minutes.”

That was the first lie.

Christmas Eve. Midnight approaching. Forty-six pieces of what would allegedly become a toy kitchen scattered across my living room floor like the bones of my parental competence.

The instructions might as well have been written in ancient Sumerian by someone having a stroke. Step 7 referenced a bracket that didn't exist. Step 12 required three hands and possibly a degree in structural engineering. By Step 15, I was pretty sure this wasn't a toy kitchen at all but an elaborate psychological experiment disguised as children's furniture.

Three hours in. I'd bent more brackets than a failed orthodontist. Lost five screws to whatever dimension eats left socks and single earrings. My shirt soaked with the kind of flop sweat usually reserved for public speaking nightmares.

If you've ever assembled something “simple” and found yourself questioning your intelligence, your marriage, and the basic laws of physics, welcome. We've all been there.

Something in my brain kept saying “real men don't quit” in my father's voice. Unhelpful. Every piece I assembled created two new problems. The more I tried to fix it, the more broken it became. An unnecessarily on-the-nose metaphor for my life, but I was too deep to appreciate the poetry.

Then my right eye started twitching.

Not a subtle flutter. A full-on spasm so pronounced it deserved its own weather advi-

sory. I'd later name him Gary. Gary, as it turns out, was trying to save my marriage. I just wasn't fluent in eye twitch yet.

My wife walked in. Surveyed the chaos. Me in the center like a holiday elf having a nervous breakdown, surrounded by toy kitchen shrapnel, muttering threats to inanimate objects.

She said four words:

"You're doing it wrong."

BOOM.

The emotional equivalent of a bomb going off in my nervous system.

She was right. I was doing it wrong. But that's not what my brain heard. My brain heard: *You're inadequate. You're failing. Everyone else can assemble toy kitchens without becoming a cautionary tale. What's wrong with you?*

My vision tunneled. Hands went numb. Heart tried to escape through my throat. I imagined violence against that toy kitchen that would have required UN peacekeeping intervention. Fire. Possibly explosives.

But here's the thing. I didn't throw it. Didn't scream. Didn't say the things my brain was drafting in real-time.

Because somewhere in that moment, something in me paused. Just long enough to realize: *This isn't about the kitchen. This is about proving I can hold it together. About competence. About worth.*

That pause? That tiny gap between impulse and action? That's everything.

The meltdown isn't about the thing. It's never about the thing. The toy kitchen is just where all the other stress decided to show up.

I put down the screwdriver. Sat on the floor surrounded by Swedish chaos. Breathed. Let Gary twitch without trying to make him stop.

The kitchen got finished eventually. Probably wrong. There were definitely extra screws left over. The oven door never closed right.

But my marriage survived that night. And I learned something about the gap between "about to explode" and "actually exploding." How much power lives in that tiny space.

Here's to the toy kitchens that teach us more than they should, and the eye twitches trying to save us from ourselves.

Cheers, Clayton

Coffee Talk 2.0: For everyone who's ever declared war on Swedish furniture at midnight.

Want the curated sequence? 7 essays, 21 days, one free chapter. emotional-navigation.com/coffee-talk