

THE CHAPEL OF EASE

Trish Bennett

EUROPE'S ECONOMIC diarrhoea has contributed to the shed making somewhat of a revival as a popular night-time destination for troubled males. The traditional shed was a humble abode where a man could go and carry out the task of domestic repairs, like the chair that Aunt Aggie's arse flattened after one too many mince pies. More recently, "Men's Sheds" organisations provide meeting places for groups of tool mad men to gather and engage in manly pursuits. The custom of "retreating to the shed" has been strong in rural families for several generations. My own grandfather was a strong advocate of "shed time." My grandmother called it his "Chapel of Ease." Grandda would spend hours everyday in his "temple." It was a big old galvanised byre cut in half by a brick wall. One side was for the cows and the other for himself.

In the days before recycling became fashionable, nothing was wasted. Everyone in Grandda's family had coal scuttles made from discarded copper hot water tanks. The metal dustpans and shovels with gun barrel handles are still going strong thirty years later. He always travelled to visit family with two biscuit tins, one filled with tools and the other medication, both never out of his sight. My parents' garage was not up to his standards but he still managed to do odd jobs like re-cover kitchen chairs and make go-carts for us.

His shed was a treasure trove of tools and my older brother was sucked in through the large galvanised doors like a pilgrim to Mecca. When we were children we spent a happy afternoon in Grandda's shrine making

wooden aeroplanes. He had taken his eye off the ball and left the door open while he was in the house. It was one of the few times as kids that we played for hours without throttling each other. When Grandda discovered we had used up all his "good bits of wood" that he had been saving, the entire family were lucky not to have been excommunicated from the county. I remember it as an afternoon of noisy nirvana when my big brother taught me how to use a hammer and nails. Being only six or seven, I had issues using the saw but the hammer was a howl. After a suitable cooling off period we resumed our Sunday visits to Grandda. We never got near his lumber stockpile again because the treasury doors had acquired a shiny new padlock.

The shed gene runs in my family. My brother survived his adolescence by making Christmas cribs, beehives and pony gigs with dad's help in their wood shaven refuge. The debates over woodwork techniques were better than any reality TV show. I had front row seats (well there wasn't much on TV in those days).

My own spouse is also a shedaholic. By the sounds of it, he was born and then reared in the shed by his father whose background was in marine engineering. His dad spent many years at sea repairing ships' engines in the middle of the Atlantic, in conditions that resulted in improvisation to ensure survival. His workshop read like a catalogue of his life and differed from my grandfather's in that it had a more nautical theme with boats, engines, fishing equipment and even an old ship's phone. Like my own grandfather,

nothing was discarded because of its potential for reuse. Being men of few words, my man got to know his dad through their time together mending items in their maritime museum. Some people like to pray at a graveside for their deceased relatives. Whenever we visit his father's old home my husband spends much of his time in and around the shed.

When we first started going out my partner was shed less. True to family tradition he made do with whatever he had. The result of a very tolerant landlord was a bedroom that was an "Ode to a shed" complete with motorbikes, bench and tool workshop. This was no mean feat because the bedroom was on the second floor of a three story terraced house. Many parties went on in that room with well-oiled click clack ladies not realising they were resting their shapely rear on a motorbike engine. His wardrobe was wall to wall steel racking, shelves neatly organised with T-shirts and trays of tools. A double bed was hidden above the door in an alcove accessed by getting intoxicated and climbing seven feet of rickety steel racking.

When we bought our first house together my man was smitten, head over heels in love. There was a shed at the bottom of the garden. The outdoor oasis took up most of the backyard but was a garden in itself. It had post box red double doors and was covered in all sorts of flowering plants, honeysuckle, clematis and two different types of berried hedge. Whatever the season, it was in blossom. After we bought the house we realised that other than a few

sheets of asbestos and a seventies cocktail cabinet for a back wall, the shed was being held together by its floral trusses. We christened it "Bestie."

Looking back I realise that the character of Bestie was what drew us to the house. She was involved in some of the key moments in our lives and was the main player in the renovation of our first home. Oil drums were converted into BBQ's for summer parties and it was herself that started the other half at the Bog Oak Sculpting (also known as rubbing his bits). The wedding plans were set in motion in Bestie. I still remember the day I told him he was going to be a Dad, while he fixed his motorcycle. His reaction was "shit" (the bike still wouldn't start). Whenever we are in the area we always do a slow drive by to see if Bestie is alive and I'm pleased to say she's blooming.

We have moved shed many times since then. Along with motorcycle maintenance our salvage rejuvenation stations have produced several bog oak sculptures, candle holders, and steps for the garden made out of old wooden pallets. Our most recent move has taken us down the country and we are renting while we search for a new home. Himself is off form. For the first time in fifteen years he has no shed to call his own. The contents of his life are in storage between many family outbuildings and it has unsettled him. It has been a very painful few months but he still manages to spend many hours rubbing his bits in the rental. He laments it's just not the same.

I was worried when we moved that the neighbours would be unsettled by the late night racket emanating from our shed. The dying coughs of a bike struggling with a damaged piston echoed in the wee hours. I had resolved to tell the hubby to tone it down until I realised he wasn't the only

participant in the grease monkeys gala. Car revving noises hailed from one neighbour's garage accompanied by high octane chorus-ing from an adjacent peer. His contemporaries' weekend shenanigans made a refreshing change from the car wash and lawn mowing echoes of our suburban past.

Some locals like to concentrate their creativity on shed metamorphosis. One neighbour's man space began its lifecycle as a modest bricks and mortar affair. In the smattering of months since we moved the shed has been in a state of flux. The morphing commenced with a large wood store add on. The following month, a carport appeared along with a pine protrusion that looked suspiciously like a sauna. When I drove past recently, I noticed a spiral of grey smoke escaping from a new flue pipe. The addition of a timber side wall and windows has completed the transformation into a rustic cabin. His opus towers behind his home and threatens to render it extinct.

One thing not mentioned in all the articles I have read on "Shedding" is what the contents of a good man shed should be. I browsed the shedding websites and saw images of men with looks on their faces similar to my man after a night dabbling in his dirty dugout. I looked to see if the essentials were there, a beer fridge, work bench, somewhere to rest an oily bum, a clapped out TV or beaten up boom-box, metal racking loaded with boxes of tools and spare parts, two vehicles of any description, one working, one for restoration. Optional extras (depending on whether the male is single or attached) are all the ornaments and sleazy pictures brought from bachelorhood that the new partner won't let over the threshold. My husband also recommends that no shed is complete without a good quality vice.

Men's Sheds Associations focus on groups of men working together. My man was horrified when I informed him about the "Men's Sheds" and how it's spreading across Europe faster than the grey squirrel. He couldn't bear the thoughts of other men in his private place interfering with "his bits". It would be the last straw. Yet despite the objections, I overheard my boy and the neighbour talking about a prospective tunnel between their man caves and a joint scheme of making a coke can solar furnace to heat them. The neighbour is a 'Percussive Maintenance' type of guy; if it's broke and you're not sure what's wrong, hit it with a hammer. Himself is more fastidious, tinkering patiently, holed up in his hermitage for days (living on rainwater if need be) until enlightenment is achieved. They decided that their repair styles would cause too much conflict and so the shared sanctum is not an option.

Not everyone is a supporter of "shed time." Kirstie Allsopp, Channel 4 television's crafty woman raised some eyebrows when she referred to paternity leave being wasted. She stated "Many men I know absolutely love it because they can go and sit in the shed." Kirstie may have a point. I remember resenting the shed in the early days of motherhood when nappies were being changed faster than tyres in a formula one pit.

Despite it's critics, family experience has shown that a shed's much more than a place to store the mower. It's a haven of contemplation and inspiration. The quiet man opens up like a daisy to the sun when he's been energised in his sanctuary. Worries dissolve with a twist of a spanner. Toys are mended and tears disappear. In our home, the secret to marital bliss is the shed.