

Shed

The Men's Shed appeared one day on the edge of Tom Perrot Oval. It rose upwards like a stately white and blue ship that cruised silently across the park. Someone said they had seen cranes carrying huge concrete panels that were stacked up like a house of cards. I only remember the sails billowing as the grass parted, and it slid, slowly, majestically, into position. It sighed into the turf, burying its based firmly into the loamy soil at the edge of the oval.

Its bulky frame soared upwards. I noticed that there were no windows in the exterior walls. There was nowhere to press your face against the glass and peer inside. This was clearly a place for secret business, where men worked or talked in hushed voices away from the persistent banter of their women.

I've been coming to this oval most days for years. Firstly, with my mutt Jasper, then with Dixie, a petulant cavoodle, and later on my own. Sometimes I would sit on the bench and watch the kids play football. Their Dads were always desperate to demonstrate how great they were in their day, but never quite impressed their sons in the way they intended. Dogs roamed freely, and sometimes I brought treats for them. It started because I had bags of them left over after Dixie passed away, but then I started to buy them especially for the park dogs.

I watched the men start to come and go. These days I have a bit more time on my hands, and before long I found myself planting a folding chair on the grass and whiling away the hours armed with my thermos and the newspaper. I never sat too close to the entrance. It couldn't be said that I was interfering in any way with the men's work. That was never my intention. But I was curious. I admit that now.

At first, only a handful of men came. They arrived alone or sometimes in pairs, always looking a little wary, taking hesitant steps towards its entrance. They looked ready to shuffle back to their cars at a moment's notice. Then they were swallowed up by the shed, disappearing into its belly and sometimes not re-emerging for many hours. Of course, I didn't remain at my station without a break, but nevertheless I was often there when they came out with a spring in their step, their hats tipped just slightly askew. Sometimes there was a sheen of perspiration on their faces. Occasionally I asked one of them what was going on in there.

'Yoo hoo, Walter. What've you been doing in there all day?' I only received a shrug or a wink or maybe a smile.

Many things in my body have started to fail me, but my hearing has remained in pristine condition. As I sat there, my bare feet on the rough grass, I heard the sounds of machinery rumbling to life within its walls. I walked over to the Shed and placed my hands on the wall. I could feel it vibrating beneath me, as though the building itself was coming to life. It felt warm to touch, and, although I knew it was impossible, I thought I could feel a gentle pulse beating within the concrete.

Captain Arthur was the Shed Manager. His face bloomed with whispery, white whiskers, and he wore a uniform of neatly ironed khaki pants and a pale blue shirt. Every morning he stood at the entrance like a sentinel. I've heard it said that he had been a captain in the navy, but I don't know if that was true. He wasn't a local, and he wasn't fond of idle conversation. As the Shed boss he was focused and uncompromising, forever barking instructions. If an activity was about to start and men were still arriving, meandering down the driveway, it was not uncommon for him to blow his whistle. The younger men would sometimes break into a slow jog. The older fellows would pick up the pace of their shuffle, tool bags clanking as they lumbered towards the Shed.

I won't pretend that I didn't want to go inside. I was desperate to know what was going on in there. But the rules were unambiguous. No women allowed.

One morning, I asked the Captain if it was possible to peep into the Shed before any members arrived. He looked aghast and reminded me that it was a Men's Shed. Because it was for Men.

'What do you want to be coming in here for anyway, love?' he said. 'There's nothing in here that would interest you.'

'I just wanted to see what it is you do all day.'

'No disrespect, but this is no place for women'. I turned away, but couldn't resist a quick glance back into the darkness behind him.

It was in September that I first noticed something strange was going on. I was perched on my chair reading. Captain Arthur stood at the entrance and his buttons looked brighter than usual. He looked expectant, gazing out towards the car-park as though he was anticipating something or someone. A few men arrived on bikes and busied themselves pulling tools and small bags off their carriers. Other men pulled into the car-park, and piled out of their cars carrying pieces of metal and wood and crates that appeared to be filled with pieces of metal and rolls of wire. I would almost say that they walked with a spring in their step, but some of these men don't have much of a spring left in them. But I don't think I would be exaggerating if I said that I could discern a sense of purpose. They hardly noticed me there with my cross-stitch, thermos and packed lunch.

One afternoon, I had just returned from home and was settling myself into my chair when men started to spill out of the Shed. They looked exhausted. I recognised, Cedric, one of my neighbours, and waved him over.

'You lot seem busy in there'.

'Yep, that we are.'

‘What projects are you working on?’

‘It’s top secret. That’s what it is. Nothing personal of course, but I couldn’t be telling you classified information.’ His face had a shine to it. His eyes were sparkling.

‘Have you been drinking, Cedric?’

‘Of course not. I’ve been too busy for that kind of shenanigans.’

It continued throughout that month. The number of men arriving each day was increasing. Clearly some of them were not even from around here. I know what sort of person lives in Mosman Park, and I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but some of these people were not of that sort. Not of that sort at all. I wondered what it was that Captain Arthur was doing in there to attract such interest, to create such unprecedented industriousness. There was a palpable excitement in the air, and I had no idea of the cause.

I clearly remember the day it happened. The sun was shining and the sky was clear. I was standing in my backyard pegging my washing on the line when I started to feel the ground rumbling beneath my slippers. I don’t know why my first thought went to the Shed, but, as I felt the movement beneath me, I was sure that something was happening up there. I quickly grabbed my chair and binoculars and rushed out the door and up to the oval. It looked strangely quiet. There were rows of cars parked in the parking area and bikes lined up the bike stands, but I couldn’t see a single person. They must all be inside. The door to the shed was closed and Captain Arthur was nowhere to be seen. The ground still felt unsteady, and, as I unfolded my chair and sat down on it, I was conscious of a low, growling noise.

I watched the Shed for some time, and after a while I noticed that it was trembling slightly. It was almost imperceptible, but if you watched it very closely you could see that the corners of the shed were gently quivering. Slowly, slowly the

movement increased until the whole building was shuddering. At the same time the noise grew, the low hum gradually rose to a persistent rumble.

‘I knew it,’ I said to myself. ‘I knew they were up to something’. I leaned forward expectantly, wondering what spectacle I was about to witness. And, as I watched, the Shed shuddered and stretched and shook, ripping itself free of its foundations. The roar of what sounded like a thousand motors rose up from within it, as it lumbered forward through the grass, taking down the trees in its path and leaving behind a trail of destruction. As it made its way towards the river, it started to pick up speed, and I wondered how it would navigate the steep descent. But, just as it reached the edge, it became airborne. There was a huge propeller on its roof, which appeared to be made out of old pieces of car metal and building materials. The Shed hung awkwardly for a moment, and then it began to ascend, rising up into the sky like a clumsy hot-air balloon.

I watched it go, watched it slowly, silently floating away into the blue beyond, swollen and heavy with the weight of so many men. As it rose higher, flapping and floating upwards, it quivered for just a moment and then I heard the distant, but distinct, sound of a thunderous burp.