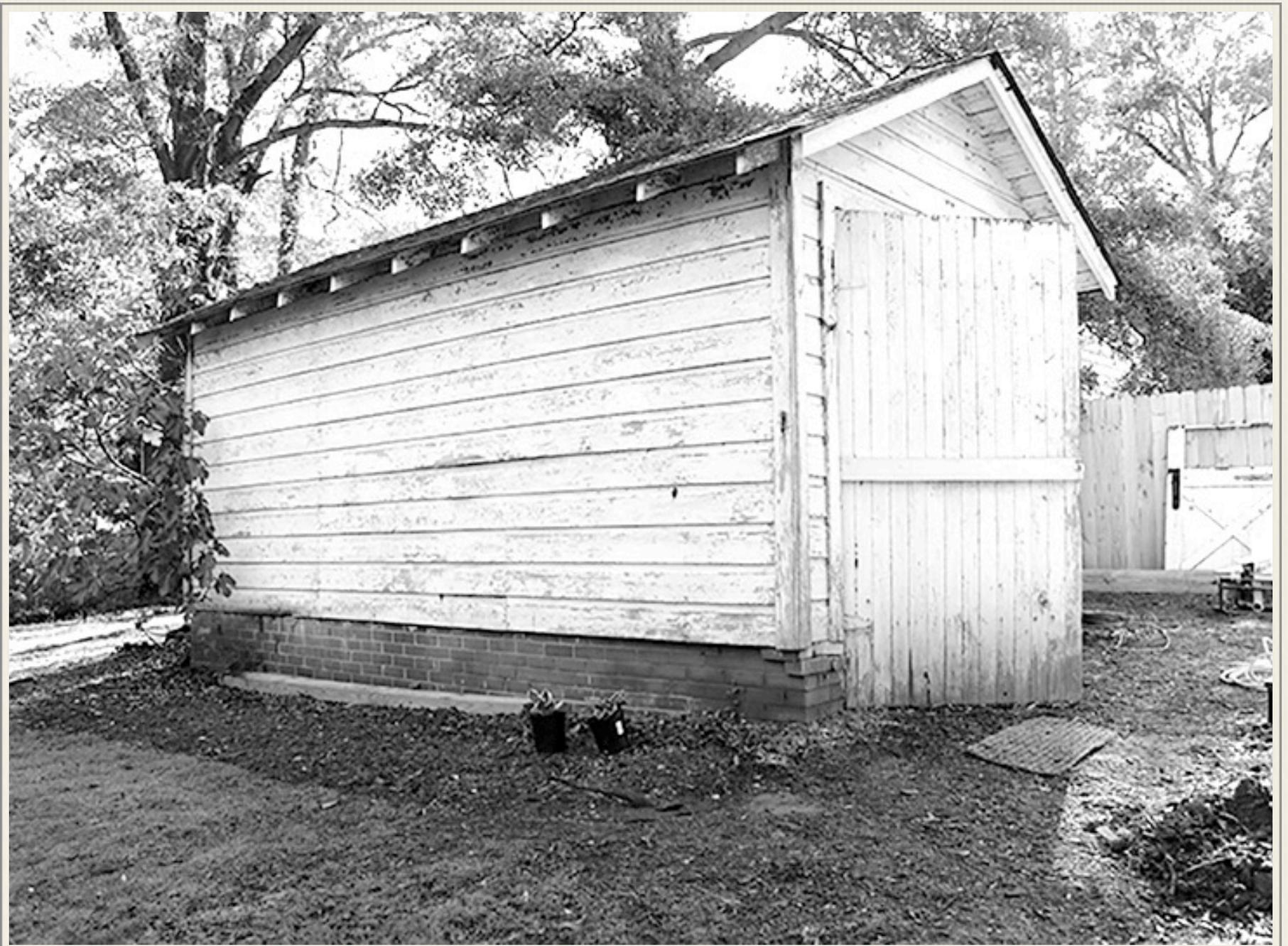




# The Shed

A SHORT STORY  
BY GAIL TAGARRO ©





# The Shed

I'd never realised what a focal point in our lives 'the shed' was, until reflecting on it after Mum had passed away.

The shed sat behind the house on our quarter acre, a long, ugly building made from white-painted length-wise pieces of timber, and with a Malthoid roof. Every few years, Dad would don his overalls, get up on the roof and paint it silver with aluminium paint – we cringe at that thought now – then waterproof the joins with tar.

This architectural eyesore, makeshift and no more permanent than our school prefabs, was nevertheless obstinately enduring. It existed when my parents bought the house when I was five, and it was still there when they sold the house forty years later.

Dark and musty inside, it was the 'everything' place: the barbeque, the fish smoker, the hurricane lamp, camping gear, the picnic basket, Dad's fishing rods, the Esky (or chillybin as we Kiwis called it), my surfboard, beach chairs, buckets and spades, suitcases smelling of mothballs containing winter clothes in summer and summer clothes in winter, used bottles, cardboard boxes, newspapers ... in short, anything that didn't fit in the house or that Mum and Dad couldn't bear to throw away or that 'might be useful down the track' was stored there. There was also an old-fashioned wooden toybox filled with toy cars, plastic cutlery sets, tea-sets, old dolls and such.

Not a day went by that we didn't visit the shed for some reason, or that Mum didn't say to Dad, 'Keith, can you put such-and-such out in the shed, or get such-and-such from the shed?'

The shed also contained Dad's workbench, with such a range of tools hung on the walls that it resembled a blacksmith's workshop. Jars full of nails and screws and mysterious objects lined the back of the bench, all coated in a good layer of dust. Dad was no handyman, but those were the years of 'do it yourself or do without'. A vice and a sander were affixed to the workbench.

Then there was 'the outside room'. This was a room separated from the shed only by a door painted hardware-store-sale bright green. It served as my eldest brother's bedroom, then I took it over when I hit my teenage years. The room had a unique character. It was quite small, with room enough for a single bed, a small built-in curtained off wardrobe, a desk and a chair. Goodness knows what my brother used to get up to out there. I was ten years younger and only ever heard about his illicit smoking sessions. I was milder and more aware of consequences than he, and my own illicit incidents were tame and few. One night after the household was sleeping I sneaked out to a party. Having to walk the entire way there – several kilometres – and all the way back again, a good couple of hours' round trip, I never felt it was worth repeating for the dubious thrill of the experience.

While my brother, who was always into his electronics, was still in residence in the outside room, he introduced a high-tech innovation that had the family humming with excitement for months and which we used for many years afterwards: an intercom, which opened up communication between the house and the shed. To call someone to meals or the phone, we'd buzz them on the intercom. Depending on how annoying or persistent we wanted to be, we could give one short blast or multiple light buzzes. It was so loud that no matter how used we got to it, the buzzes invariably made us jump. The

person in residence in the outside room had an advantage over those in the house: the intercom doubled as a primitive bug, and as long as no one in the house heard them switch it on, they could eavesdrop on conversations in the house. This was especially useful for me when my parents were deliberating over whether to allow me to go out with friends. Knowing their reasoning gave me the chance to prepare a persuasive counter-argument if necessary.

More exciting were my fantasies centred on Laurence, a student from my high school who came to our place once a fortnight to mow the lawns. I'd spend thirteen days imagining how I could get him to see me in my nightie, without my mother witnessing the scene. Once, I managed to persuade him into the shed, but I was fully clothed and he spoke to me only from the doorway. I discovered he was a very dull person indeed.

The outside room was witness to the outpourings of teenage angst into my diary, and the scene of oft-shed tears of adolescent frustration over the unfairness of life, but most of all it was simply my bedroom and my refuge. It was also sometimes the scene of Gothic horrors. A few times, I woke suddenly in the dead of night, convinced there was someone or something in the room with me. I was so petrified I couldn't move, hardly daring to breathe even, my heart beating so hard I was sure 'it' could hear the hammering.

When I married and returned from overseas with my new husband, the outside room received a wondrous lift for us. Mum and Dad furnished it with a double bed (surprisingly, it fitted, with room to spare), repapered the walls, hung new curtains, painted the woodwork and laid new carpet. What a homecoming!

One of the challenges of sleeping in the outside room was coping with nocturnal visits to the loo. Our loo was located on the back porch of the house, so I had to leave the outside room when I needed to go. I visited the

loo in all weathers and seasons: on wet nights, crunching snails underfoot, on fragrant summer nights, on freezing, clear, starlit nights, on moonless nights, moonlit nights, and cloudy nights.

On the front wall of the shed, Dad erected a basketball hoop for us to shoot goals. Despite the amazing array of tools on his workbench, the hoop was always a little lopsided and a little loose, but it served its purpose throughout our childhood and those minor imperfections never worried us.

When I was in my teens, a carport got added to the end of the shed so that the whole structure took on an 'L' shape. The carport fitted the two cars, Mum's and Dad's – they had Toyotas for years, Mum a Corona and Dad a Corolla. However, it was a tight fit and the driver had to take care manoeuvring in and out of the carport to avoid hitting the carport supports or the side of the house. In keeping with the shed's multifunctional role in the family, the carport doubled as a volley for tennis. Dad had that end of the shed specially boarded so we could hit balls against it to our hearts' content. It was good exercise and often, a fine way to purge some of our teenage angst.

Aside from shooting hoops and hitting volleys, we played the usual childish games like hide 'n seek in and around the shed. We were inventive in our games and as the eldest, I was sometimes dramatic. One particularly theatrical game we played one day involved telling my middle sister to go hide until she was called, then getting my youngest sister to lie on the grass in front of the shed while I fetched the props. These were a square of wood and a hunting knife – Dad owned a sports and leisure store. We put the wood under my sister's T-shirt, then stuck the knife through her T-shirt into the wood. The final dramatic touch was splashing a few drops of red paint around the knife on the T-shirt. Then came the best part. The youngest was instructed to lie perfectly still with her eyes shut, while I went screaming hysterically in search of our other sister. True to her part, little one remained

immobile while the other sister knelt by the 'corpse' and in a tragically dignified manner, pronounced it dead, tenderly inspecting the foul murderer's handiwork. Remaining serious has never been my strong point, so hysterical screaming soon turned into hysterical laughter, and my youngest sister and I were rolling around on the ground unable to defend ourselves against our middle sister's furious little pounding fists.

A spectacularly large variety of red rose, Mum's pride, grew against the northern wall of the shed. It was strong and durable. Reasonably sheltered from the elements though it was, nothing could protect it from Dad's brutal pruning with the hedge clippers each year. It seemed to positively relish in the haircuts though, for every year it blossomed again into full glory. Opposite the rose, near the clothesline, grew the orange tree. The fragrant orange blossom scent wafted through the windows of the outside room, and the tree unfailingly provided an abundant crop of small, sweet, juicy oranges every winter, thanks to Dad's frequent applications of blood and bone fertiliser, compost and grass clippings.

Behind the orange tree was Dad's vege garden, port-cullised by a trellis at one end for the beans. The compost bins sat at the other end of the vege patch. For a man who said he didn't much like gardening, Dad produced a fair crop of beans, lettuces, tomatoes, capsicums, spring onions, leeks, courgettes, parsley and herbs. Mum was always sending one of us down the back yard at dinner preparation time to pick this or that from the garden. I think Dad actually quite enjoyed the gardening itself; what neither he nor Mum liked was weeding, so that was one of our weekend chores.

The rhubarb patch sat right behind the shed, a most uninspiring clump of motley looking leaves and dried up stalks disguising the succulent red plant in its midst. I may be mistaken but I never once saw that plant get fed or mulched, yet, like the shed itself and the red rose, it was a constant

throughout my childhood and stayed there right up to the day Mum and Dad sold the house and moved out. Mum used to make rhubarb and apple crumble, or stewed it and added it to other stewed fruit to have with cereal at breakfast time.

The grandfather of trees in the back yard behind the shed was the satsuma plum tree. This grand old faithful predated even the shed. Every year, without fail, it produced its large, red-fleshed fruit that ripened late in January, and its spreading branches shaded many summer picnics. The wasps used to gather in droves on the fallen, rotting fruit on the ground, so we had to be careful where we stepped. The tree's thick foliage sheltered me during many an adolescent pique, when I'd sit on a branch eating green plums against orders, finally forced to ground by terrific stomach cramps, my ears reverberating to the chorused 'how many times have we told you not to eat green plums?'

A large old lemon tree that produced thick-skinned fruit, and a couple of small mandarin trees completed the back yard orchard.

Late one afternoon, I spotted two tiny scrawny kittens with wild, frightened eyes peering out from under the shed. Hunger and desperation had forced them out of their hiding place when their mother didn't return. We assumed she'd been run over, leaving the orphans to fend for themselves. Taming the wild kittens was an exercise in patience. It took weeks of coaxing before they let us near them. Every day we'd put a saucer of warm milk close to their hiding place, then disappear into the house and watch from the pantry window as they cautiously approached, sniffed and finally drank. Any attempt to shorten the distance between us caused them to flee. Gradually, we'd place the saucers of milk and food further away from the shed until they were right at the foot of the steps leading up to the house. Then I began staying while they drank the milk, sitting quietly without moving on the top

step. Each day, I moved down a step. Sometimes, I'd have to go back up one when they became too nervous to bear me so close. One day my patience was rewarded when they let me stroke them while they were feeding. From that moment, they officially became part of the family. The naming followed the taming. Molasses was tawny and black, like the treacly stuff Dad used to drink every morning as a laxative. Viking's coat was steely grey, and he sat very straight and dignified with front paws tucked under his body and his ears pricked up, looking just like the prow of a Viking vessel.

Molasses was the bolder of the two, but slower and clingier. They were both gentle creatures who never bit or scratched, though Viking never quite lost his nervy streak. Molasses spent his life showing his gratitude for having his life saved. He loved jumping into my lap in the evenings and he would have stayed there all night purring and dribbling in ecstasy if he'd been allowed to. Viking was more aloof and infinitely more dignified. He was Mum's favourite.

Viking died not long after I left home when I was eighteen. Molasses lasted many more years. At the end, when he was ill and ailing and had lost his appetite along with most of his teeth, I panicked and tried to build his strength with vitamin pills and special food. I put a box with a blanket on the back porch for him to sleep in at night. As I gently stroked his mangy fur, his gratitude shone through his rheumy old eyes for helping to make his last days comfortable. One night he didn't return to the blanketed box. Mum and Dad never told me, but I'm sure he returned to his humble beginnings to die beneath the shed and dream one last time of the mother who had left them so many years before.

I often wondered why the shed lasted so long, why Mum put up with such an eyesore most of her life. Then I realised something I'd never noticed as a child: in a purely practical sense it was a wonderful asset for a family of

seven living in a three-bedroom home. It gave Mum and Dad, who were great hoarders, somewhere to put everything. It provided a bedroom for my eldest brother; there weren't enough rooms in the house for us all. It was somewhere that the children could play and entertain themselves for hours on end.

It was part of our lives.

