

TINKERING AWAY TIME

By Mark Cornell

I'm in the doghouse again.

‘ Thanks for nothing, ’ my old man shouts at me down the other end of the line.

‘ You're very welcome, ’ I reply before he slams the phone down. He'd asked if I could store eight removal boxes of my sister's stuff in my garage. My oldest sister was breaking up with the same guy for the umpteenth time and needed somewhere to put her crap. The family had done the same to me ten years ago when the old man and my uncle Clarrie suddenly rocked up in my driveway with a trailer load of my sisters rubbish. Dad was moving to Mooroolbark and after some major excavations, had found two ancient tables that my sister hadn't used for donkeys. I couldn't say no to the sight of them walking up the driveway with my Auntie Alice's ancient disassembled oak table, so they put it with another laminated pink Formica table in my garage. Dad reckoned they'd only be there for a short time, I threw them out in last year's hard rubbish drive.

The old man came out with the same old garbage again this time.

‘ Your sister's stuff will only be there for a short time. ’

‘ Dad, she said the same thing last time, the tables ended up our garage for ages. ’

‘ What are you doing this arvo ? ’

‘ Watching Collingwood with Tim why ? ’

‘ I could do with a hand up here. I'm trying to make room in the garage for

your sister's things. '

' It's a bit short notice isn't it ? ' My eleven year old son and I had bought party pies, sausage rolls and pizza shapes to watch the traditional Queen's Birthday holiday clash, between Colingwood and Melbourne. Besides, my old man never throws anything out. When he had a hard rubbish drive a couple of months ago he asked me to help him.

' Are you actually going to throw anything out this time ? '

' Well....'

I helped my Dad move house from Nunawading to Mooroolbark. Getting stuff out of the house wasn't too much of a drama, but he didn't touch the garage until settlement day. Our family always had a two car garage; trouble was you could never fit a car in because they were always chokers with Dad's crap.

So, we started on settlement day. The old man had row upon row of steel shelves loaded with things in boxes, tins and jars.

' Can we chuck this in the skip Dad ? ' It was a large jar full of the small rectangular plastic thingies you click on to your shaver so you don't cut yourself.

' Nah! You never know when they'll come in handy.' The old man took the jar and stored it in Uncle Clarrie's van. I came across a big jar full of plastic pens

without the middle bits in them.

‘ Chuck ‘em out Dad ? ’

‘ No son, you’ll find they can be pretty useful as well. ’ Uncle Clarrie raised his blue eyes to the grey sky as into his van the empty pen cases went. And so on and so on all frigging afternoon it went, until the van bulged with Dad’s crap. I got an idea of how Howard Carter must have felt excavating Tutankhamen’s tomb. Once I got through the first row of stuff on the shelves; there would be another row of crap behind it, then another row of crap behind that as well.

Because Mum had given me fairly clear instructions that morning, ‘ Throw as much of your old mans shit out as you can,’ I attempted to go beyond his all seeing eye and attack the spare bedroom full of junk. Every family house I’d lived in had a spare bedroom full of the old man’s junk. I opened up the door to be greeted by a Himalayan Mountain Range of crap. There were cardboard and foam boxes stacked right up to the ceiling, old stereo and radio parts, microphone stands, enough old lamps and ceiling lights to open up a light display at Bunning’s, radio magazines dating back to the nineteen fifties, spare shelves and brackets, dusty rolls of carpet, car doors, old cupboards with avalanches of gunk pouring out of them when you opened the door etc, et-bloody-cetera.

With Mum’s words ringing in my ears I snuck up and turfed some bloody lights into the gaping mouth of the skip.

‘ Who threw that in ! ’ shouted the old man circling the skip like a bloody hawk. When I shrugged my shoulders Dad turned his glaring brown eyes to our Pommy neighbour who’d foolishly volunteered to help us with the move.

‘ It twasn’t me Barry honest ! ’ The poor bugger froze like a rabbit trapped in the headlights. I suffered from my second nervous breakdown as it took us three weeks after settlement

to finally clear the old man's garage. My first nervous breakdown occurred years ago when we moved from Bulleen to Nunawading. Uncle Clarrie wasn't available that time, (funny that,) so it was just me and Dad and a trailer. I somehow managed to help Dad clear the garage and

the spare bedroom full of junk only to discover he'd had stored a layer of mega crap *under* the house ! I was almost tearful as I crept in the dirt to pull out the walls to our old above the ground swimming pool, (they'd make good insulation,) swallowing hard, when we pulled out the old solid metal mast of a broken clothes line, (handy if a pipe breaks,) and an emotional wreck by the time we hauled out half a dozen old Morris engines; (they're collectors items you know.)

Still it wasn't all doom and gloom, I remember laughing when our cocky chatted from his cage on the trailer to people when they pulled up behind us at an intersection. Cocky was Dad's best hate, he used to sit on his shoulder and chat to Dad all night out in the garage. The old man also had this mad, fuzzy headed friend, who only surfaced when we moved. His loony eyes always lit up every time he saw Dad's crap. 'I feel like all my Christmas's have come at once,' he'd say as he'd shovel Dad's shit into the back of his panel van. (To this day I never figured out who this bloke was and why he was given unfettered access to Dad's stuff.) He once ripped off a foam lid of one of Dad's boxes, put it in his mouth then chirped, 'I'm so happy I'm foaming at the mouth.'

But the funniest thing I ever saw was when Uncle Clarrie finally completed his shuttle of shit from Nunawading to Mooroolbark. The Mooroolbark garage was full to capacity, so the weather proof foam boxes splashed out into the backyard. Dad had promised Mum that they would be able to get their cars into the new garage. When Mum realised this wasn't going to happen and when she saw Uncle Clarrie and Dad storing boxes out in the backyard, she stormed out of the front door up to the van. And with her head stopped down in rage, her arms flapping, in the words of my wife, Julie, she looked like an enraged goose as she hissed out, 'You're such a selfish, selfish old barstard! ' Thus was my family's introduction to the neighbours of Mooroolbark.

I never had an old man, he was always out there in the friggig garage. He was a speaker rigged up in the lounge room, where we'd flick a switch and say, 'tea's ready Dad,' 'Righto,' he'd reply, come in have his meal, then go straight back out again. He'd only appear in the house at eleven at night for a read. When once I asked him why, he replied, 'it's the only time the house is quiet.' Admittedly both of my sisters are drama queens so, in some ways, I don't blame him. He used to call them the 'climatics,' because we always got 'four seasons in one day' with the both of them. I remember being shocked once when I visited a friend, Peter, and his old man was sitting on the couch talking to his family when it wasn't meal time! I was even more stunned when he came out in the backyard to play cricket with us. Christ old Barry boy never did any of that with me. Most baby boomers that I talk with admit their old man was the exactly the same. I can understand if they were out there earning an extra quid, but most of them potted away neglecting their family by doing bugger all. My poor old Mum's a social butterfly who's always having her wings clipped by old Barry because all he wants to do is hover over his work bench and tinker away with his bits and bobs.

To be fair to Barry I can remember a few times when his stuff did come in handy. When I did a front headlight to my 1972 Torana, the old man got up on his ladder, pulled out a box, and there it was, the exact same headlight in perfectly good nick. When Julie's car stereo speaker went in her 1991 Corolla, Dad had a replacement one stacked away in one of his foam boxes. Julie and I laugh when we look back on it now, because over the years practically everything fell off her Corolla except for Dad's firmly screwed in speaker. It was a solid as Uluru.

When we buried Barry's father, Tim, my Pop, I can remember standing next to my old man with tears streaming down my face. Dad turned to me and said, 'I wish I could do that but I don't know how to.' I hugged the poor bugger. I cry at the drop of a hat, I get it from my Mum, Dad used to call me a sook when I was a little tacker. Dad's a child of The Great Depression, they never had the toys that kids have got today, poor old Pop worked on the susso, pushing wheelbarrows of clay

around a quarry from dawn to dusk. So they had nothing; maybe that explains Dad's behaviour, whenever anything comes his way, he grabs and never lets go.

From what I heard Tim was a hard old taskmaster. Nana used to brag about how she never laid a finger on Barry. But Mum told me that when Dad did do something wrong, Nana used to lock him up in his room until Pop came home to thrash the pants off him. I sometimes picture a terrified young Barry waiting in his room, and then the horror of a boy being strapped around his legs until they're red by his father's belt. Maybe the garage is Barry's refuge from emotional rawness; and the only way he can express his love is by doing a job for you. I remember being on the verge of a genuine nervous breakdown when after four years of study at Uni, I threw the towel in and decided I wasn't going to into teaching, plus the woman I adored didn't love me, then my frigging 1968 Cortina's engine blew up. Barry rebuilt the car for me from parts he had out in the garage, the old Cortina rocketed on forever.

To be fair to Pop, he taught me the important basics that Barry never showed me, like how to hammer a nail and bowl a flipper. Pop and Nana took me to see Collingwood, they used to come down and watch me when I played for the local team. Pop and I became really close after he gave me the letters, postcards and medals from his brother Edward, who died on the Western Front during the so called Great War. Pop's eyes became moist when he explained to me that Edward was his favourite brother. Poor old Pop didn't know how to cry either.

I like to think I'm not as bad as Dad when it comes to garages. I have an extensive collection of Tasmanian beer bottles and cans on the wall next to the workbench in my single car garage. Pop's ancient work vice sits on my bench, I knicked it from his decaying garage down in Rosebud when I discovered they were going to pull our old family holiday house down. Dad reckons the vice was built by Pop's father, the original Tim. I sometimes wonder if he stood next to it tearless in his garage, when he heard of the death of his son, Edward. I have only one cupboard half full of crap. When Julie sometimes says that I'm just as bad a hoarder as my old man I remind

her that at least we can get our car in. Like my friend Peter's father, I'm never out in the garage. I've planted lots of bushes and creepers around mine so that over the years it'll hopefully blend into the garden.

Tim and I knock off some party pies and sausage roll, then jump off the couch and abuse the screen. Like all the bloody games between Collingwood and Melbourne, no matter where they are on the ladder, it's always close. I don't call my son a sook as he cries when Melbourne threatens to beat us because I'm doing the same thing. It's half time, so we go out into the street and play kick to kick. Midwinter Melbourne puts on her typical show of a freezing north wind battling grey clouds pregnant with rain and snow. Dad's probably in his icebox of a garage shuffling his boxes and listening to the game on the radio. I wonder if he's still in a stink with me? Who knows? But, I bet he's probably content out there tinkering away time. Tim's pink face is beaming after I praise him for taking a spectacular mark. Life can be good in the doghouse.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favourite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has travelled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.