

The Work Shed

A plain old wooden work shed, that's all it was. Just a plain old shed right at the end of Stuart's next-door neighbour's garden. Nothing seemed special about it; it just looked like any other work shed in the neighbourhood. That is when you could actually see it, for in the spring and summer months the garden grew overgrown with weeds, brambles, and great vines that sprung up from the ground linking from tree to tree. Indeed, at this time of the year getting to that shed would be impossible, and Stuart should know. One year whilst playing football in the garden with his older brother Mike, the ball had ended up floating over his neighbour's fence into that jungle of a backyard. Here is what happened:

'Stu!' His brother cried in an exasperated voice, 'why do you always have to lose the ball?'

'I didn't do it on purpose!' Stuart protested. And no, he didn't. He wasn't as good controlling the ball as his big brother, and his brother was right: it was always him that seemed to lose it.

Stuart looked down at his feet as his big brother shook his head and placed his hands upon his hips. Well, that was it. Stuart knew that this was the end of their playtime together; he had lost the ball (again). Mike would probably call up one of his friends now and go out with them – it wasn't fair! Stuart was still too young to be allowed out with his friends unless there was a grown-up around, and he had an idea that he was facing another lonely afternoon inside on the computer.

'Stuart? Mike?' It was their mother's voice, 'I'm just nipping out to the shop down the road. I won't be long. You'll be okay for a few minutes, won't you?'

'Sure Mum.' Mike replied.

'Okay. Look after Stuart until I get back, and behave yourselves! I won't be long.' She said from the window of the kitchen overlooking the well-kept garden.

'Mum?'

'What Stu?'

'Can you bring back some strawberry whips?'

'We'll see! Don't cause trouble now! I won't be long.' And with that Stuart and Mike heard the sound of the front door close shut behind her. Young boy's thoughts floated through Mike's mind, the kind that got you into trouble if you were caught. Stuart recognised the look, 'What?' he asked, cheering up a little. Since Mum was out for a while, he had acquired some more time with his big brother.

Mike walked up to the fence separating their garden from next-doors; Stuart followed excitedly a few paces behind. Mike was just tall enough to see over the fence when he stood on tiptoe, something that annoyed Stuart – he had to continuously jump to get a view. Seeing as it was halfway into the summer holidays, only the mysterious wooden outline of the shed could be seen.

'I see it!' Mike said.

'What?' Stuart replied, feeling upset that he couldn't see what his brother was looking at.

'The ball you dummy! I can see it. It's just about half way in. I reckon we could get it.'

'How?' Stuart asked. He felt uneasy. His Dad had told him never to go into Mr Hemshore's garden under any circumstances. He had said that nasty things lived in the brambles and vines, things that couldn't be seen, things that waited. 'They wait for little boys just like you, Stuart.' Was what he had said.

Stuart jumped again to see over the fence, he thought he saw one of the bushes at the edge of the undergrowth shudder, confirming his fears that yes, there were things waiting in there; things that couldn't be seen. He was brought back round by the sound of his brother's voice talking to him.

'How do you think?' He asked, looking knowingly at his younger brother. The answer dawned across Stuart's face in the same way it must have dawned across Issac Newton's face when that apple had fallen on his head, 'You're not going over to get it, are you?' Stuart asked in awe; butterflies started to fly around in his stomach, and a part of him hoped Mum would come back from the shop soon. He knew that his big brother could handle any situation. He could do anything, and he knew all the answers, but the things in that undergrowth, the invisible things? No, he didn't think Mike stood much chance against them.

'Nope,' Mike said grinning at his brother, 'you're right. *I'm* not going over there, *you* are!' Stuart started to laugh. It was a joke, right? Surely his big brother wouldn't send him into the garden

next door - Mum had told Mike to look after him! But Mum wasn't here now was she? And Mike wasn't laughing, and as Stuart's smile faded, his grin grew.

'Are you serious!' Stuart exclaimed.

'Yep! You kicked it over, so you're going over there to get it!'

'But...but...' Stuart stuttered.

'But what?' Mike asked impatiently. They didn't have much time to pull this rescue mission off; Mum would be back soon. Stuart's eyes began to water up, 'What about the *things* over there?'

'What *things*?' Mike sighed. He had his hands on his hips again and was giving his brother that look Stuart hated. It was the look that said, "Don't be so stupid!"

'You know what things!' Stuart said close to tears, 'the invisible things!' Mike was suddenly serious, his tone horribly calm, 'Yes! That's why we have to get the ball back! That's why *you* have to get the ball back!' He said.

'Why?' Stuart asked, 'I don't understand! Why do I have to get the ball back?'

Mike smiled, 'No, you wouldn't understand, would you? Just trust me! You have to get that ball back, Stu!'

'NO!' Stuart shouted, 'I'm not going over there! Not with those things in there!' Mike shrugged his shoulder's, 'Up to you I suppose. But they'll come after you now.'

Stuart's eyes grew huge, 'No they won't! Dad said that they don't know we're here! He said that so long as we stay on this side of the fence, they can't see us!' Stuart stepped away from the fence where his brother was once more standing on tiptoe, looking over.

'They won't need to see you...not if they find that ball.' Mike said.

Stuart stopped dead in his tracks as his brother's words swam around in his head. Reluctantly, he rejoined his brother at the fence. 'What do you mean?' He snivelled, 'you're scaring me! I'm telling Mum!' Stuart loved his big brother, and he looked up to him, but he hated it when he treated him like this. Without a reply to his question, he asked again, 'what do you mean? Tell me!' Mike sighed (all part of the act), 'Well, if they find the ball, *and they will*, they can see it now that it's over the fence, th-'

'So what!' Stuart interrupted and moved away from the fence again. Mike continued in the same tone, 'If they find the ball, they'll know the smell of your scent!'

Stuart whipped around, 'They'll know yours too!' He said.

'Doesn't work that way.' Mike continued shaking his head, 'you were the last person to touch the ball, so your scent is on it, not mine. That's why they won't need to see you. They'll be able to smell you!'

Stuart's eyes widened.

'Come on Stu, you gotta get that ball back before they find it!' Mike ended.

A strange, eerie stillness crept over the world as Stuart tried to imagine what the things in Mr Hemshore's garden looked like. Sure, they were invisible from this side of the fence, but once he was over the other side they wouldn't be. Once he was over the other side, Stuart would be able to see them! But perhaps a more frightening thought was the fact that they would be able to see *him* just as they could see the ball now - the ball with his scent on it!

'Will they really be able to smell me if they get the ball?' Stuart asked. Mike nodded gravely, 'They *will* find the ball, and when they do...' He ended by displaying a rather savage smile on his face.

'Well, I don't believe in those things anyway!' Stuart replied defiantly, holding his brother's gaze.

'What are you waiting for then?' Mike asked, 'Get over there, come on, I'll give you a bunk up.' Mike walked towards their house and the start of their garden. There was no way Stuart could gain access to Mr Hemshore's garden this far in. At the house though, where the garden started, there was a small patch that wasn't overgrown. Here was where Stuart could sneak over.

Stuart followed his brother and watched him kneel down linking his hands together to provide a foothold he could use to get over the fence.

'Come on then,' Mike said, 'quick! Before Mum gets back.' Stuart reached with his hands and grabbed hold of the top of the fence, but sharply pulled them back as a pang of pain shot from his left palm up through his arm. 'Ouch!' He cried, shaking his hand. Mike grabbed his hand and looked at it, 'It's only a small splinter; don't be such a baby!'

'It hurts!' Stuart protested. The splinter of wood hadn't gone too far in, and there was enough of it poking out of the skin that Mike was able to get a hold of it between his fingernails and pull it out.

'There!' He said to Stuart.

'Thanks' Stuart said.

'Come on!' Mike said, as he re-made the temporary foothold for his brother again. This time Stuart grabbed the top of the fence with no event, and placing his left foot into Mike's linked hands, he pulled himself up the fence with his arms while Mike pushed him up. Gaining the top, Stuart hooked a leg over the fence, seemed to balance on the threshold for a moment, and then dropped to the ground on the other side. There was a clap as his feet and hands landed on the only concrete part of Mr Hemshore's garden.

Stuart had tried to land quietly, that goes without saying, but that hadn't happened. He'd landed so heavily on his feet that he had to use his hands as stoppers to prevent himself rolling over. The impact of the concrete on his hands made them sting, and as soon as he regained his balance, he remained there for a while on his hunches blowing into his palms.

'Come on Stu! Hurry up! Get the ball!' Mike whispered from the other side of the fence. For some reason, this part of the fence was slightly higher than it was further down. It was so high here that even Mike couldn't see over un-aided. He had however found a knot in the fence that had fallen out (had been pushed out by Stuart to tell the truth, so that he could spy on his strange next door neighbour, Mr Hemshore), and Mike was using this to try and find his younger brother now. Stuart however, was just outside the range of the spy hole.

Stuart heard the sound of his brother's voice, but it sounded scarily distant. Worse than that though was that he thought he heard a slight waver in that voice. Was Mike, his big brother, *scared*? This did nothing to settle Stuart's already failing nerves. He had never quite felt like this before. It was a peculiar concoction of fear mixed in with a manic kind of excitement only kids are capable of. He knew damn well that he shouldn't be here, but rather than intimidating him, the thought served to excite him all the more. He felt weird being here though. For the first time ever he felt completely and utterly alone. For the first time ever it felt like no one could help him, not even his fearless big brother. For the first time ever (and this was what scared him the most) he felt so far away from home, a million miles away perhaps, but even this number didn't do the feeling any justice. Perhaps an inch of wooden fence (maybe not even that) separated him from home, but it may as well have been a million feet thick should one of those things come out from the brambles. He was on this side on the fence now, Mr Hemshore's side, the wrong side, and as he turned his gaze to look into the ever-thickening chaos of intertwined vines and brambles he shuddered. They would all be able to see him now, and if they'd already got hold of the ball, they would be able to smell him as well!

'Stu...Stu! Come on! Hurry up! What are you doing over there? Where are you?' It was Mike's voice, and it brought Stuart back round from the madness of his imagination. Suddenly, Mike's view through the hole in the fence was blocked, and it took him awhile before he realised that it was Stuart looking out from the other side.

'Be quiet, Mike!' Stuart said sounding more than a little upset, 'they'll find me if you don't keep quiet! They may not be able to see you, but they can hear you!'

Mike laughed. It was a laugh that spelled out the words "gotcha!" to Stuart, 'There's nothing over there, Stu! There are no monsters over there!' He laughed again and continued, 'Monsters don't exist in the real world silly! I only told you that so you'd go and get the ball back!'

Stuart pulled his eye away from the fence; a reassuring gust of wind blew his hair lightly back, 'That's not true!' Stuart replied, now annoyed as well as upset, 'Dad told me there *were* monsters over here!'

'Don't be so silly!' Mike replied, he sounded pleased with himself that he'd managed to get his little brother to go over the fence to get the ball back. On a couple of occasions when they had lost something over the fence (the last time it had been a Frisbee, the type that was supposed to come back after you threw it) Mike had knocked on Mr Hemshore's door. He never answered. Mike didn't find this particularly odd; he did have trouble walking after all, so why would he bother answering the door? The thing Mike did find strange however was when Mr Hemshore would appear at the window and watch them. He would just stare.

The windows of Mr Hemshore's house had net curtains drawn across the window. They were the type that you could only see through one way. Looking through the hole in the fence from this side, Mike's side, he couldn't see anything, but something told him the old man was there, watching. He shuddered at the thought. Yes, this way was much better. Send Stuart over to get the ball; besides he had kicked it over in the first place!

'Dad only told you that so you wouldn't climb over the fence, dummy!' Mike mocked.

'Why would he do that?' Stuart sounded genuinely puzzled, 'Why would I go over the fence?'

Mike didn't reply to the question. He knew the answer, but he didn't want Stuart to know it. A few years ago he had climbed that fence. For some reason, the old brown shed had intrigued him – it still did. For some reason that day he knew he had to get to it, he had to know what was inside. His father had caught him climbing the fence and told him never to go into Mr Hemshore's garden again. He had told him that monsters lived in all those brambles. At the time, it had worked and eventually Mike outgrew his strange desire to see inside the shed. He was older now though. Older and wiser, and this was a perfect time (he thought) to pass the knowledge down to Stuart that their father was lying about the monsters over there.

'Come on Stu! There's nothing in there! Go and get the ball!' Mike pushed.

'Okay!' Stuart replied, he sounded edgy, but why? His brother had just told him there were no monsters here, and he believed that, he truly did. But there were monsters in his head, and at this moment they seemed as real as the concrete he'd just landed on. Carefully, slowly, he moved off the concrete and onto a thin strip of grass a couple of feet high just clear of the tangle of undergrowth.

Now he was scared. Not because of what might be lurking in the shadows of those twisted, scrawny vines, he was scared because if he took one more step he would be in view of the kitchen window, and then, he might be caught. For some animalistic reason, this scared him. It scared him more than the monsters he'd imagined in his head, although why, he did not know. Stuart knew that he could easily outrun Mr Hemshore if he wanted to - he could be back over that fence in a flash should he hear the kitchen door to the backyard open. The runners that held up the fence were on this side, and it was as easy as climbing a ladder to get back over. But Mr Hemshore...there was something about him.

'Stu!' His brother cried again, he sounded exasperated. At that moment, as if his brother's voice had filled him with the confidence he needed, Stuart took a step to the edge of the grass. A sensation of pins and needles criss-crossed through his body, while at the same time, a cold feeling ran up and down his spine, and he froze. Slowly, he turned towards the kitchen window. Stuart stared at the window: was Mr Hemshore watching from behind that net curtain? The curtain wavered. It seemed unlikely to be because of a breeze; Mr Hemshore's windows were never open. Even in the hottest day of summer, the windows were always shut! Even if it was so hot the ground melted, the windows were shut! Even if it was so hot it made the fires of hell themselves feel cold, the windows were shut! Shut!

What was it that Mr Hemshore wanted to keep out of his house? Was he afraid that someone would break in? In all fairness, Stuart didn't blame him, if his Dad weren't around at night he certainly wouldn't sleep with his bedroom window open; he wouldn't sleep with any window open. Like Mr Hemshore, if his Dad weren't around, Stuart would have all the windows shut. And then he heard it...a voice inside his head spoke so loudly and clearly that Stuart jumped and turned round to find where it had come from, and felt uneasy when he found no one there. He was more disturbed by what the voice had said though: 'It's not what he's trying to keep out...It's what he's trying to keep IN!'

Stuart shuddered again. Enough of this! Time to get the ball and get the hell out of here!

Into the brambles he threw himself. His heart beat wildly in his chest; all around him were eyes, yellow eyes. Still, further in he went, ducking and diving, weaving from left to right, faster and faster. Sweat formed on his brow, his t-shirt clung to his chest; it was like being in a miniature version of the Amazon rainforest.

'Stu!' A voice whispered sharply. He turned his head. Nothing there, and then wham! He ran straight into a thick clump of brambles. The thorns ripped through his shirt making shallow scratches across his arms and legs, most deep enough to draw blood; they stung.

'Shouldn't be here Stu!' That voice again, haunting, eerie. This time though, he didn't turn around, although perhaps it would have been better if he had. Up ahead still some thirty feet away was the shed. It was the first time he had seen it. It was the first time he'd ever paid any real attention to it, but of course, now that he *had* seen it, he would remember. From this distance only the outline could be seen, but this only fed his imagination more...for some reason, he had to get to that shed!

'Stu! Come on, Mum's back!' This time, it was a voice he recognised. Maybe it had been Mike's voice that he'd heard all along. Forgetting about the shed, he didn't think he could get to it anyway - the brambles were far too thick from this point on. In fact, he didn't think he could go any further at all. Luckily, he didn't have to. He had already run past the ball when he had been spooked by the voice (could it have been Mike's voice?).

Backtracking, he reached out for the ball that had nestled itself rather neatly into a bunch of rather nasty looking thorns, took hold of it, and managed to throw it back over their side of the fence.

'Good one Stu!' He heard his brother say, and that was the last thing he heard anyone say for some time, for what happened to him next was so traumatic he had no clear memory of ever going back through the brambles to the patch of concrete. He had no memory of ever climbing the fence to get back to his side. He remembered getting the ball. He remembered throwing the ball back over, and he remembered a voice. Not his brother's voice as he had originally thought, but *that* voice: 'There ARE monsters here Stu...There ARE monsters here...Can you see them...? They can see you...RUN!'

Eerie light...not dark, not light, but eerie. That's how it was, that's how I (Stuart) remember it. I ran...my goodness I ran. I ran through those brambles as if they weren't even there. I didn't feel them though. I didn't feel those thorns cutting through my flesh. To tell the truth I didn't even see the brambles...but I saw those things...oh yes, I saw them!

My brother told me that they weren't real, and I believed him! I actually believed him over what my Dad told me! But my brother is the best! He wouldn't lie to me...even if he did (and had he?) he would never had sent me over here knowing that these things existed would he?

Can they see me? Can they really see me? I can see them...oh yes, I can see them. They're waiting, watching...yellow eyes...yellow eyes that's what I see...yellow eyes piercing through the shadows. Nearly out now...At least they can't smell me! At least I got the ball before they could get it. Yes, I'll be okay as soon as I'm over that fence, they won't be able to see me then. But I'll be back, oh yes; I know I'll be back...that shed...I must get into that shed...not now though...Mum's home...maybe...what's that? Ah, what IS THAT...MUM...MUM!!!

The ball came flying back over the fence.

'Good one, Stu!' Mike shouted as he ran to get the ball, 'Now get your smelly butt back over here!'

Mike heard frantic rustling from the other side of the fence. He didn't really think much of it; he just thought Stuart was trying to get back as quickly as he could because he'd told him that their Mum was back. Mike had no idea what was over that side of the fence, but Stuart knew...Stuart knew all too well. Mike had no idea that his brother was in trouble. He had no idea that his brother was fighting for his life. He had no idea that his brother was being hunted.

Suddenly, he heard his brother shouting. No, it was more like screaming and it made Mike's blood run cold. All he could hear was: 'MUM...MUM...MUM!' His brother's voice disturbed him so much he wished he would just shut up. But when he did finally shut up, the silence was worse.

'Stu? Stu?' Mike yelled, running towards the fence. But there was nothing. The sound of his brother's yelling that had just a moment ago made his blood run cold, he yearned to hear again.

'Say something Stu...Anything! Don't play games! This is serious, Mum will be back any minute now!'

No answer. A few seconds past, but to Mike that felt like an eternity, then he heard harsh clawing sounds on the other side of the fence. Mike froze. Had his Dad been right all these years? Were there *really* monsters over there? Was that the *real* reason Mr Hemshore never went into his garden? Was that the *real* reason his garden was overgrown? Was that the *real* reason Mr Hemshore kept all of his windows shut? But this wasn't the overwhelming thing on Mike's mind at the moment. The overwhelming thing on Mike's mind was what was coming over that fence! Mike jumped and let out a shriek as a bloody hand appeared at the top of the fence. Shortly after a face appeared. It was Stuart. He managed to get one leg across and seemed to balance on top of the fence for an eternity. Mike thought he looked very pale, and his clothes! How on earth did he manage to get his clothes into such a state! They were now nothing more than tattered shreds. How were they going to explain this to Mum? Worse still, when Stuart jumped, the bottom of his jeans got caught on a nail in the top of the fence causing him to fall awkwardly on his arm to the sound of a sickening crack.

...Darkness...that's all I (Stuart) see. It surrounds me like a kind of viscous thick fluid. When I breathe it enters inside me, goes into my lungs, and is carried all over my body by the blood that pumps through my veins. I can feel it flowing through me. I can feel it in my toes; I can feel it in my face. But wait, it isn't entirely dark here, I can see light. Yes, thin strips of light, and now I can see a brownish coloured outline on either side of those strips of light. The colour looks like wood. The strips of light are probably separated by no more than four or five inches of darkness (wood). I reached out, but my searching arms didn't (couldn't) stretch far, they hit something solid, something that felt coarse

like wood. I was standing up. Had my brother locked me in my wardrobe again? We used to do that to each other, locking one another in my wardrobe when we were bored. We used to see how long we could stay in there. I didn't like it! I hated it! I don't like the dark, and my brother could always stay in the wardrobe longer than me. Once I managed to stay in there for half a minute, and when I was let out, sweat was running down my forehead, I had shouted to be let out much sooner than that, but Mike wouldn't let me out.

It was dark save for the slits of light in the wood, and cramp, and there was only just enough room for me to stand up. The smell was musty, earthy, and I could smell the scent of thick vines and brambles. I started to panic. I remember trying to call out, but my voice wouldn't work. I hammered on the door. It didn't budge one bit, and I felt thin splinters of wood go through the soft fleshy parts at the side of my palms; I hardly felt those though, I was too frightened. It suddenly dawned on me where I was: I was in the shed of course, Mr Hemshore's shed at the bottom of his garden. Now if that were true, who on earth could reach me! Suddenly, the door swung open and I had to raise my arm up to my face to shield my eyes from the light.

In the waiting room of the hospital, the doctor explained to Stuart's mum that kids would always be kids, and told her not to worry about anything. Stuart had simply fractured his arm, that was all, and he assured her that he would have it plastered up in no time. He had also assured her that his babblings were just a result of his shock, and that he had a very vivid imagination indeed. In any case, did she really believe in monsters over the fence? That was something her husband told the kids!

Stuart was in a mild daze as he was wheeled into a small room. The nurse that had wheeled him in gave him an injection in the arm that quickly made him feel even sleepier. In the room, alone with the doctor, Stuart thought there was something familiar about the man. The doctor removed his facemask. Stuart recognised instantly that the grinning face behind the mask belonged to Mr Hemshore! Trying to scream out and not being able to - the anaesthetic he'd been given had him tight in its grasp - the last thing Stuart saw before his eyelids closed was the room change into the interior of a plain old work shed.