

The Thing

By Tim Gulson

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Two neighbours resolved one day to build a Thing. It wasn't an easy decision to make - they were both well aware of how serious an undertaking it was - but in the end it seemed that it simply had to be done. The Thing obviously had to be built, and they were obviously the ones to do the building.

Fate, opined the first neighbour.

Destiny, agreed the second.

And so, one glorious Saturday morning at the height of summer, the two neighbours set off, armed with bin-liners, marigolds and scrubbing-brushes

Now you may be thinking that these are not ideal tools with which to fashion a Thing, and you'd be right. But the second neighbour had a brother-in-law. And that brother-in-law owned a lock-up garage. And in return for their clearing out the rubbish from the garage, the brother-in-law had agreed to let them use it as a workshop for the Thing.

The second neighbour took with him a six-pack of Fosters. Just because they had to work, he reasoned, didn't mean they had to work sober.

It took them the whole day to clear that garage, working in the sweltering heat as the little patch of sunlight from the one window slowly crawled across the floor and up the wall. But at the end of the day, as the sky began to turn from purple to orange, they heaved a sigh of relief and, wiping the sweat from their brows, headed home.

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Sunday dawned as beautiful as anyone could wish, and the two neighbours were up with the sun, each filled to the brim with enthusiasm for the task ahead.

They took the second neighbour's Volvo out to the scrap yard and began rummaging around for material to go towards the Thing.

One neighbour would hold out some tarnished and twisted object, an eyebrow raised in query.

The other neighbour invariably nodded his approval and the object would go into the back of the car.

In no time at all, the car was full. The scrap yard manager, overcoming his earlier reluctance to be woken up so early on a Sunday morning, wished them all the joy in the world and waved them a hearty goodbye. The thick wad of notes that the two neighbours had given him sat on the kitchen table, awaiting repeated counting.

The neighbours made a slight detour on the way back, and picked up some tools from B&Q. (These went in the roof-box because the car was filled to bursting point.) And then, ready for the challenge ahead, they returned to the lock-up.

The garage was cool and still in the morning air, a haven from a day that was already beginning to get hot.

The neighbours unloaded the car and began to catalogue the scrap. There was a big pile of twisted metal (some of it very rusty) and a smaller pile of bits of glass. There was even a very small pile of interesting-looking plastic and rubber and wood and anything else that the neighbours had thought would come in useful.

They spent ages just sifting through the various piles, arranging the pieces into spirals and swirls and squares and circles, or just holding them up to the light and admiring them.

Without words, both neighbours knew exactly where each piece would fit in the Thing. It was as if the instructions were being beamed directly into their brains. Neither really believed in God, and they certainly didn't hold with all that Little Green Men nonsense, but still...

Before they knew it, the little square of light was high on the wall, and had that tint that lets you know that the day is nearly done.

And so with heavy hearts, they locked up and went home.

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The next day was Monday. And that, for most people in the western world including the two neighbours - meant work.

The second neighbour worked a long way from home and so had to leave very early. The first neighbour waved at him from his kitchen window and then went back to his breakfast. But the tea tasted oddly flat, and no matter how much he buttered it, his toast remained too dry.

He knew what the problem was, though: he couldn't stop thinking about the Thing. If only he could call in sick at the office and go down to the garage instead. But no, one had to have standards after all. Besides, the second neighbour had the keys to the lock-up.

He poured the rest of his tea down the sink and shuffled morosely to the front door.

But as he got into his car, a thought struck him. What if thieves had broken into the garage and stolen some of the materials? Or if vandals had got in, and messed up the neighbours carefully sorted piles of scrap?

He should rush straight down there now, just to be safe. That would be the responsible thing to do. He could spare a few minutes and still get to work on time, so why not?

He pulled out into the traffic with a happy grin on his face.

When he got to the garage, though, his smile faded. The big door was rolled halfway up on its tracks and the lock was lying on the floor just inside.

The first neighbour's worst fears were coming true.

He grabbed the heavy crook-lock from under the passenger seat and edged towards the half-open door. He could just make out a figure crouched in the shadows, and suddenly became very aware that no-one knew he was here.

Swallowing his fear and steadying his fluttering heart, he gripped the crook-lock firmly in his right hand whilst with his left he slowlyâ€¦ slowlyâ€¦ eased the doorâ€¦ very gentlyâ€¦ up on its tracks.

When the gap was big enough he gathered himself and â€¦ jumped through with a sort of strangled grunt, raising the crook-lock over his head, ready to swing down and brain the intruder!

But the startled face that whirled to stare up at him was that of the second neighbour.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then both neighbours collapsed laughing. Between howls, the

second neighbour explained that he had decided to come down and make sure the garage was locked properly. The first neighbour, tears of laughter streaming from his eyes, could only nod.

They both reached for their mobile phones and called in sick.

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This was the way the Thing grew:

From a random array of junk on the floor, a pattern began to emerge. The spirals and swirls slowly grew together until there was a kind of sense to the whole thing. Each element fitted exactly with the others, and as more and more fell into place, there was no longer a pile of scrap but a Thing.

And somehow, with every passing moment, it looked more right.

It was as if the Thing knew what it wanted to be.

This was how the neighbours worked:

Crawling around on the dusty garage floor, they hammered and polished, welded and braised, jig-sawed and drilled until the knees of their suit trousers began to wear through.

And all the time, not a word was spoken.

There was a powerful image inside both of them, and they simply relaxed and let it become real in their hands.

Six days and six nights they worked. At first they answered their phones when they rang, but the worried voices of their wives got in the way of the song that the Thing was beginning to sing. The first neighbour turned his phone off soon after sunset on the Monday. The second neighbour smashed his with a lump-hammer not long after. The plastic keypad found its way into the Thing.

They ate takeaway pizza and went to the toilet in the allotments behind the lock-up. They grew beards and began to smell like animals, but they didn't mind. Neither did they sleep, or feel the need to. Their whole attention was fixed on the growing Thing. Even the Missing Persons appeals from their wives on the little paint-splattered radio in the corner went unnoticed.

And then, just before lunch on the seventh day, they realised that they had finished.

The first neighbour slowly stood (*pop! pop!* went his knees) and opened the big garage door, letting the full summer sunlight into their gloomy haven of the last week. Blinking in the light, the second neighbour scrambled to his feet and joined him. Wordlessly they turned.

The two neighbours looked upon the Thing that their hands had wrought, and they saw that it was good.

Truly this was a Thing of beauty. The first neighbour said as much.

The second neighbour told him he was not wrong. But there were so much more to it than just plain beauty.

The Thing seemed to be speaking without making a sound. It seemed to say, don't worry, everything will be fine. It seemed to say, we can leave all this behind and become something better. It seemed to say, let me show you the way.

If either of the two neighbours had had the words, they could have said that the Thing was the archetype of everything that the human spirit admired. Not only did it possess grace, and power, and strength, and colour, and life, and delicate balance, and material harmony, and perfect asymmetry, and the impression of gossamer lightness combined with the sense of ultimate solidity, ultimate thereness, but it possessed all these in such abundance that it seemed more real than everything around it.

But they didnt have the words. And so they stood and stared.

They stared at the sunlight as it heliographed through complex arrangements of fine lenses which had once been the bottoms of milk bottles. They watched it bounce off polished armatures and gleaming spans that had spent their former lives as bits of cars. They marvelled at the way it refracted through the prisms and reflected from the mirrors, and caressed the helical innervators, and kissed the reciprocal metaflanges, and settled lovingly on the empanelated inverse calniforms.

Slowly the sun set, but with every moment, the changing angle of the light picked out a new feature, sending the two neighbours into fresh paroxysms of joy.

For hours they stood there. And when it was dark they came to realise that they had only just begun.

They agreed that their jobs had to go for a start. If they were to bring the joy of the Thing to the world,

there would have to be sacrifices. The wives would be made to understand, eventually, and they would miss the kids, but it would all be worth it.

The first step was to notify the press. The first neighbour knew someone at the Guardian and the second neighbour's brother-in-law worked at the BBC, so it shouldn't be too tricky.

And then the world tour. England first, of course solving the inner-city problems, the spiralling unemployment, the knife-crime - the whole gamut of Daily Mail Doom in one fell stroke. America next. Perhaps seeing the Thing would help them stop their partisan bickering, get the nation back onto track as a beacon of liberty and equality. Speaking of which, the Middle East would probably need a few weeks of shows before they collectively saw the light. And China would obviously take a while to set up, if only because of the sheer scale of it. The two Koreas would make sense for afters. And Sub-Saharan Africa next, although they weren't sure where to start. Zimbabwe probably. Maybe Somalia.

Scribbling on the back of an old till receipt, the second neighbour reckoned they should count on four or five months of touring, but they could definitely get in all the priority nations before Christmas.

And then peace. Lasting peace.

So they went home, promising to start bright and early the next morning with the phone calls.

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But the instant they got home, there were shelves to put up and cats to worm, and the washing machine was on the blink and David got a D in English, and Susan had to go to the dentist tomorrow but the car was in the garage and the million other little trials that come with domestic life.

And always, as soon as one problem was dealt with, another came along. The boiler was making a funny sound, or the Sky box was on the blink, or the drive needed redoing.

Slowly, but surely, the Thing was pushed to the back of their minds. And there it faded. Of course it had been fun to build, but was it any more than a weekend tinkering project? It couldn't really have promised all that it seemed to have, could it?

Gradually, the two neighbours forgot

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One year later to the very day on an equally gorgeous summers afternoon, the two neighbours were relaxing in the second neighbours garden. They had had a couple of beers, and had exposed their bellies to the sun for the first time that year.

A perfect day.

And then the second neighbour's wife had to spoil it all by saying that she had promised her brother that they would clear out his garage. It seems someone had broken in and left a load of scrap there.

So grumbling, they headed off to the lock-ups, armed with bin-liners, marigolds and scrubbing-brushes. And a six-pack of Fosters. Just because they had to work didn't mean they had to work sober, after all.

But the sight that confronted them when they opened the garage door destroyed what little enjoyment of the day they had left.

Lurking in the shadows was a twisted mass of rusting metal and jagged glass. It hulked there like a tangled spider the colour of nightmares, reaching for the neighbours with many-jointed legs encrusted with rust and corrosion. The sunlight bounced dully from its sagging mass, but never seemed to illuminate it fully. Somehow, it looked â€œinfected.

Around it was a discarded mess of tools, from hammers to welding torches, lying where the culprits had dropped them.

The first neighbour wondered aloud who could have built such a terrifying and ugly Thing.

Kids, answered the second neighbour, whose mother had been a teacher and had therefore instilled in him a pathological hatred of anyone under the age of thirty.

But why, asked the first. What could they possibly have hoped to achieve with this abomination? It beggared belief, even for kids.

The second just shrugged. In his experience, there was little point in trying to fathom the motivations of minors. They may as well have been Martians. Just look at it. Something in your head would have to be twisted or broken to want to bring such ugliness into the world.

Typical for the nation's youth, though always creating a mess and expecting decent, law-abiding citizens to clean up afterwards .

Something should be done.

Grimly, they set to.

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