

Under an old apple tree at the top of the garden, dappled in sunshine, is a small green shed. It sits a few yards from the hedge that separates our tiny patch of Dorset from the garden next door. Within the shed, its occupant, Louis, our 13-year-old, is doing whatever it is that the male of the species tends to do in a small outhouse. Precisely what that is I cannot say, because with sheds, there is an unofficial *omertà* that forbids the owner from divulging his activities to any female.

Louis may or may not be the youngest shed-dweller in Britain but he is surely the proudest. Offered (within financial, legal and moral reason) the choice of any present to mark his shift into teenagerdom, this 8ft x 6ft building was his first choice. Surely, I suggested, he would prefer something electronic or mildly dangerous, something with wheels? But no. Only a shed would do. His father took a different view, and the beam of paternal pride was audible even at a distance of 130 miles. 'That's my boy,' he said, speaking from his own shed in Shepherd's Bush.

Louis's shed, however, and his father's could hardly be more different. Where Louis's is a Morris Minor, being tiny and purely functional, his father's is a Bentley convertible. It's true, the entire roof doesn't come off (although there is a skylight). Yet it is a well-equipped machine, electrified and connected to the main water supply. It houses not only a flat-screen television, DVD player, reclining leather armchair, capacious bookshelves and an execu-desk, but also a loo and what an estate agent might call a 'bijou kitchenette'.

It arrived ten years ago, ready-made, from Leicestershire, but bespoke, in that it was finished according to precise instructions. (Not until then, or since, has my husband applied himself so fully to tiny details.) It was lowered, spinning on the end of a crane, into the bottom of our London garden. Our rear neighbour complained to the council, who told her there was nothing she could do. She sold up and moved to Australia.

Louis, five at the time, was naturally intrigued by this new dwelling and asked whether it meant that his father was going to live in it. I told him not to be daft, although I knew that he had hit on the truth.

For those eight years, Louis has been my shed mole. Where my daily visits with tea and toast are invariably intercepted at the door, Louis is permitted limited access. Each day (during term time, when we are in London) when he



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returns from school, he runs down to the shed and reports back to me. 'He's pretending to be working,' is the most common observance; more often the news will be that he is shouting at Andy Murray on the TV, reading a biography of Lyndon B Johnson or rearranging his collection of £1 coins into taller piles.

Once, when I hadn't seen him for three days, my husband and I had a long talk about all this. He told me, 'What you must try to understand is that every man is an emotional inadequate, and we need weird, ritualistic order in our lives. We need space where we can insulate ourselves from emotional contact with others, particularly our female superiors. This is the true meaning of the shed.'

So there we have it. Once, long ago, I naively assumed that a shed was a storage space for tools.

The rituals adhered to in a shed are as baffling to the infidel as prayers in Latin or Hebrew.

Talking of which, my husband is Jewish, so a 13th birthday is something of a watershed. If I'd been Jewish too, Louis would have been bar mitzvah'd. Instead, Matthew made do with the creation of the shed and as his boy set off

up the garden to spend the night of his birthday inside, there was a gleam of pride in the eye that said: 'You are a man, my son.'

What Louis gets up to in his Dorset shed is almost as much a mystery to me as what his father does in the London version. I know it involves arranging his collection of fossils, reading by torchlight, listening to his CDs and drawing. I assume the rest of the time is passed daydreaming about *Doctor Who*, a passion of his that predates fossils by many years. What is the Tardis, after all, if not the ultimate in sheds?

My little boy is my little boy no longer and, for all the inevitable poignancy of that realisation, at least I know that he is somewhere safe and within easy reach.

I head up the garden path with glasses of milk and Marmite sandwiches every now and then, just as I do with tea and omelettes to his father's shed in London, and he always seems pleased to see me. But he intercepts me a few feet from the door and in the gentlest way leaves me in no doubt that my journey ends there.