

## 'A GRAND DESIGN FROM A MINI IDEA'

Jack Staines sat on the wooden bench and stared at his boots. His big toes were showing through again. He had stuffed the boots with newspaper over the split soles, but they were not holding together any more.

“Down to Vinnies again tomorrow - but we’d better get to the ‘shed’ now before dark”.

Jack turned to his mate who was also gathering up his few belongings, and packing them into their shopping trolley. Around the Gosford area Jack and his buddies, living on the streets, called their shelter ‘The Shed’. A disused warehouse, not large, but enough cramped space for around 50 people to sleep rough. After a meal at the Salvo’s kitchen, they all turned up at the derelict building around dusk with their bags or trolleys - keen to get out of the blustery weather.

Inside the storage area there was not much chatter – mostly men and a few women with children – they kept the noise down hoping not to attract attention. Council had let them stay during the winter months. Each found a corner to make a private space. Jack and his friend Dunno used a big storage cupboard.

The wind and rain lashed the old building, even the Central Coast could be bleak in August.

Dun said “Jacko you need to pick up some different boots mate – I can see your toes.”

“Yeah - tomorrow I’ll try Vinnies again. I need a size 11. Not many around.”

After a restless night - with the snoring all around and low conversation - Jack and Dunstan set off early. These two stuck together, understanding each other, hoping to ‘get back on track’ again. They had both owned businesses which had failed owing to debt - then came the slide into alcohol and split from their families.

The St Vincent de Paul shop had just opened at 8.30 am. The two wiped their feet on the mat and went in. They knew most of the volunteers here, and got a cheery welcome from Mrs Anstell, on counter duty today. An official looking bloke was talking to her. She greeted the older men, and introduced them to the suited gent. “This is Mr Friedman – he was just telling me about a new plan to try and house all you blokes. He’s from ‘The Mini Houses Foundation’. It’s a new plan to put up groups of 14 square feet homes, not much bigger than caravans, with bath, bed and living space, and shared laundry. General meeting room, TV and internet, and shared vegie garden. The building materials are all pre moulded at the factory and can be assembled for around \$30,000. People with few work skills are being trained at TAFE to erect these homes, all on land not suitable for other buildings. You all get your own small garden, and a mezzanine floor can be included to sleep a second person.” Mrs Anstell was clearly excited at this new chance for some of the people she met every day.

“Woah – that’s new.” Jack looked enquiringly at the official.

“Yes I’m interviewing suitable people for the Foundation,” said Ben Friedman.

Jack had forgotten about his boots for the moment. “This is my mate Dunstan Jones, we’ve known each other for years, and look out for each other. You need someone you can trust to talk to. So many families split up - then loneliness can get to you. Too many blokes keep silent – then ‘take themselves out’. Jack Staines turned to his friend, “We could get our names on the list Dun. Maybe it wouldn’t be too long.”

Mrs Anstell was pleased to know of the chance these two decent men might get. “Mr Friedman, can they get on the waiting list now? I know them well and would be happy to sponsor them.” “Yes surely – they will have an interview, and if accepted could be housed by Christmas. We are starting another group of houses now, with council permission.”

Jack and Dun felt like dancing round the shop, then Jack nearly tripped on his old boots. “ Do you have any size 11 Mrs Anstell? I’ve patched these too many times.”

“This is your lucky day Jack Staines. Some old black boots came in on Wednesday – fairly good condition. And what about that stray dog you mentioned last week?” “Yes, the poor old ‘mut’ – someone left him at the warehouse. We’re keeping an eye out for him. If we could share a place, and have a pet, he could have a new start too! Council officials have been turning a ‘blind eye’ to us in the old building over the winter, but they will kick us out soon. It’s a health and fire hazard. But recently we heard about an app called AskIzzy .com. It’s been created for homeless people to get help - maybe somewhere to stay, legal advice, counselling or special needs. It’s Australia wide – you just punch in your area. Quite a lot of homeless people have smart phones”

Jack turned to Mrs Anstell. “ I’ve heard about tiny houses in America. Some are built on to trailers, and there are even fold down ones in shipping containers - that pop up! It’s amazing some are getting built here in Gosford.”

Dunstan had been silent, but now it was dawning on him that maybe their lives could turn around. Mr Friedman had explained that even with the low rents, part of that would be set aside as a fund for each resident to build up for further needs, such as a rental bond or buying household items. “ Thanks to your old boots we heard about this today Jack.” Jack clapped him on the shoulder. “Just think of it Dun – you , me and the old dog, taking a walk to the beach from our little place!” - He was amazed at how their day had turned out, after trying to sleep in the old warehouse, and dragging all their belongings around with them - “And all because a mini idea led to a grand design – that will help so many people.”

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*‘Grand Designs’*