

DEEP SQUARE LEG

At the Moorabbin Community Oval, love blossoms as the cricket season begins. Or it might,
if the groundskeeper's dog would get out of the way.

The cricket season starts in October. Mick has two weeks from the last kick of winter footy until the first spring ball is bowled to turn the churned-up Moorabbin Community Oval into a pristine carpet of couch and rye. For those two weeks, Mick and his dog, Kook, work without break to drop in the new pitch, replace the turf in the muddied centre circle, re-seed the outfield, and paint the boundary lines.

It's hard work, but for Mick there's nothing like the morning sun catching the dew on his pristine field, or the thrum of lawn clippings buzzing in the air. It's an oasis from the diesel exhausts of the highway nearby.

And then there's Sharon.

The Moorabbin Cricket Club Woman's Division 2 team use the oval for pre-season training. It's a ceremony when Mick lets Kook rip down the tape that's kept the public off his regenerating grass, and he gets a polite round of applause from the ladies. Sharon is the captain of the team, a woman whose stocky frame belies the soul of an athlete and indefatigable energy.

"Love what you've done with the turf, mate," Sharon says, patting Mick on his scrawny shoulders with a hand almost as big as a wicket-keeper's glove. "New blend?"

"Nah," says Mick. "She's the same as last year." He twizzles a few blades in his fingers as though to say something more about them, but heat comes up from the collar of his woollen windcheater and reddens his face.

After a pause, Sharon says *Well, better get out there* and jogs onto the oval in that heavy-footed gait of hers. The orange-and-black training tracksuits start their star jumps and toe touches, but Mick mostly watches Sharon, her booming voice calling numbers at a pace her players can't keep up with. Mick doesn't see Sharon over the winter months because that's hockey season. He's glad cricket's back.

Sharon can get a little stressed once the season starts proper. She's not only the captain, she's also the manager, coach and star player of the team, and cuts up the oranges up as well. These aren't responsibilities she takes lightly.

First game of the season, Sharon barrels over to where Mick is sitting on his turf roller.

"Mick, where's your bloody dog?"

Mick looks about, can't see Kook. He tugs on the glasses that make him look a little like Harry Potter, if Harry Potter had drunk too many ales and worked outside his whole life.

"Not sure."

"She's got my bloody cup!" Sharon bellows. "I'm not facing Bev Hammer without groin protection. You know she goes for the crotch."

Mick shrugs inside his oversized windcheater. "Sorry," he mumbles.

True to form, Bev Hammer's first ball is a zinger that shoots straight towards Sharon's groin. Sharon manages to fend it off with an ugly stab of her bat, but the look she gives Mick afterwards is a thunderbolt.

Sharon is an accomplished batter, but Mick enjoys watching her bowling the most. Steaming toward the crease, bent forward at the hips, wrist cocked with the cherry-red ball in her hand. Bits of grass thrown into the air behind her like a powerful thoroughbred thundering down the home straight. He wonders what it would be like to face that ferocity, but he never did have the disposition for competitive sports.

Third match of the season, Mick's tamping wet clay into divots in the pitch when Sharon bails him up.

"Your bloody dog, mate, I swear," Sharon cracks. "Marnie's come down with a hangover so we're letting her sleep it off down deep backward point. I've got to get behind the stumps so I need my wicket-keeping gloves. Where's Kook gone and put 'em?"

Mick adjusts his glasses and looks up at Sharon's blocky shadow. She looks beautiful with her hair pulled back in a ponytail so tight it tilts her head backwards.

"She'll give them back," Mick mumbles. "She just likes to play hide-and-seek."

"Right now, mate, I couldn't care less. There's ten ladies out there who will tear my arms off if we don't give Croydon North the shellacking they deserve. They pipped us in last year's final and you know we ain't gonna let that happen again."

Mick finds the gloves, piled neatly beside his bag of tools and beer cooler. Kook's napping nearby in that deep, oblivious way only a shaggy old hound can. Sharon snaps the gloves on with a glower and squats behind the stumps, butt crack riding out of her cricket whites.

They lose. Sharon is a tempest. During the pre-season, she and Mick would often share a quiet beer after training, sitting on foldout camp chairs beside the shipping containers that house the cricket gear. During the season, though—and especially after a bad loss—Sharon’s harder to pin down.

Mick pours Sharon’s can into Kook’s water bowl. Kook looks at him with his droopy setter eyes and flomps onto the grass.

Things don’t improve much over the rest of the season. Mick and Sharon spend most game mornings hunting around the change rooms and the perimeter fence and the gravel carpark for the bits of kit Kook’s hidden. One time they find one of Sharon’s knee pads wedged high up in the branches of a eucalypt.

“Well bugger me,” Sharon says. “I’d be angry but that’s just impressive. How did she get it up there?”

Mick does the chivalrous thing and climbs to retrieve it, but he’s not the sporting sort and barely gets off the ground. The pair try to dislodge the pad by throwing a footy at it but that only seems to wedge it tighter.

“Only one thing for it, mate,” Sharon says. “Get on my shoulders.”

“What?”

“Climb on up. What, don’t think I can take your weight?” Sharon kneels down. “Hurry up, mate. Chuck a leg over.”

Afraid to go against her, Mick loops a gangly leg over Sharon’s shoulder. He inhales the glorious citrus tang of her Rexona body spray just as he is thrust skyward.

“Can you reach it?”

Mick stretches out his fingertips, but the pad’s beyond reach. “Gimme another half step...”

Sharon moves, but her sports socks slip inside her plastic slides and the pair tumble to the ground. Sharon’s on her back and Mick is across her belly, all akimbo. Kook bounds over and starts licking the faces of the pair of them.

“Your bloody dog, mate,” Sharon says, but this time it’s with a broad smile that brings out the sun-squinted lines around her eyes.

For the fourth season in a row—every season since Sharon’s been at the helm—the Moorabbin Cricket Club’s Div 2 women’s team makes the final.

Sharon finds Mick over by the scoreboard, slotting the number plates into place.

“There’s something seriously wrong with your dog, mate,” she fumes. “This is the bloody grand final!”

She’s louder than usual. A few teammates stop what they are doing. A woman rocking a pram by the playground looks up from her mobile phone to see what the ruckus is.

Sharon’s face hardens at the attention and she amps up. “She’s taken my bloody bat! I can’t beat Croydon North without my bloody *bat*! She’s a menace, your dog!”

Mick looks seasick. His mouth moves as though he’s trying to say something, but nothing comes out.

“Spit it out, mate!” Sharon yells, hands in mallets on her hips. “This better end with me getting my bat right now or I don’t know what’s going to happen to that bloody dog of yours.”

Mick just looks at the turf. After the longest time he manages a response.

“She’s not a bad dog.” He speaks slowly, softly. There’s barely a sound on the oval. “She’s a good dog. She loves me. And she knows me. She only takes your stuff because then you come to me to find it. And she knows you make me happy.”

Sharon turns as pale as her cricket whites. For the first time in her whole life she’s lost for words. The crowd watches, silently. Sharon snorts and stomps off. Mick sinks even deeper inside his windcheater.

Mick finds Sharon’s bat over by the shipping containers, gives it to Marnie. The match is close. Mick’s heart sits in his belly as he works the scoreboard, and even the joy he feels when he flips the numbers over to mark Sharon’s century is quickly bullied out by gloom.

Sharon’s runs aren’t enough, though. Croydon North feast on the Moorabbin Cricket Club’s Div 2 women’s bowlers, even getting more from Sharon than they usually would. By the last over of the day, they only need four runs to win.

Sharon knows her opponent. Karen McAlister’s a block of a woman with a brow like a table edge and a powerful on-side drive. So Sharon keeps her deliveries wide, tempting her to play

into the covers. The tactic seems to work. Karen swings and misses at five deliveries in a row, the ball thumping into Marnie's wicketkeeper gloves each time.

Last ball of the day. Sharon charges toward the crease like a bull. Mick can feel the ground shudder underneath him and he's not sure if it's Sharon's footsteps or the semi-trailers rattling on the highway. Sharon's front foot hits the pitch—*his* pitch—with destructive force, her face a contortion of immense effort. The seam leaves her hand perfectly and the ball slides towards Karen's off-side.

But Karen reads it. Shuffles to the side. The sound of leather hitting willow cracks across the oval like a gunshot, the ball leaving a red bruise on Karen's bat.

The crowd gasps. The ball races towards the boundary. If it makes it past the circle of cones in the outfield, Clayton North will once again be crowned champions.

Mick grimaces. He knows his oval. It's finely tuned to help that ball run, to glide unstoppably over the densely packed grass. Never until this moment has he wished he wasn't so good at his job.

Noelene Jonas lumbers after the ball. She huffs in pursuit and looks as though she is feeling every one of her four knee surgeries. She's not going to stop it.

A figure bolts onto the oval. A flash of red, coat gleaming in the late afternoon sun, streaking across the grass like a savannah predator. And just before the ball rolls clean past the ring of cones, Kook grabs the leather in her teeth and runs it back towards the stumps.

A hush falls over players and crowd alike. Karen McAlister raises her gloved hands at the umpire—*what is this?*—but the ump is squinting from underneath her wide-brim hat, unsure if the ball crossed the boundary line. Karen turns to her batting partner, they've just realised: they're going to have to run.

“Get that dog!” Noelene yells from where she is panting in the outfield.

Watching the mayhem from beside the scoreboard, Mick doesn't notice Sharon come up beside him.

“That your dog, mate?” she says.

Mick gulps. “It is.”

“Looks like she's got something of mine.”

Mick's sun-bleached lips tremble. "I can see that."

"Not sure you do, mate." Sharon steps in front of him, right in his face. Mick can see the tan lines in the shape of sunglasses around her eyes, the sweat beading on her forehead.

"It's not Kook who's stolen something of mine, mate. It's you."

She takes Mick's hand with more delicacy than a woman who lay's bricks for a living might, places it on her heart. The she picks him bodily off the ground and plants her lips on his like he's the grand final trophy. And Mick kisses her back, melting at the taste of the zinc sunscreen on her lower lip.

Kook runs up and drops the ball at their feet. The crowd cheers.

The End.