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Max Johansson-Pugh

The Roundhouse

I

Me and Jack are about as close as two friends can be. Jack is in my class at school, and when we sit together, we laugh until our sides hurt. Jack says the funniest things. Teachers say we are connected at the hip and make us sit at opposite ends of the classroom - why, I do not know. Our parents never act like this. In fact, when me and Jack are together, they often leave us alone and smile and laugh and drink those bubbly drinks that smell quite bad. It is always so much fun to play with Jack.

After school we walk for about half an hour along a steep bank until we reach the train tracks. On one side of the bank there are tracks that bring trains in and out of town, and on the lower side of the bank the tracks take trains to a big building Dad calls the roundhouse. Me and Jack lie on the bank and talk about how stupid homework and girls are, and when the tracks start to shake, we jump up and throw rocks we have collected at the passing train. It is a lot of fun. Sometimes, the trains would even blow their horn for us. Jack always makes a point of finding a big rock, the size of an adult's fist, to throw at the train which I think is a bit much. He looks kind of angry when he throws these big rocks. I don't really think about it because we are having so much fun.

We play until the sun starts to fall and then race each other back home. Jack's house is closest. He's lucky because his house is right close to the train tracks. His house is always dark and Jack always looks so sour when we get there. I guess it's because I always beat him in the race. I said goodbye and ran home where Mum had some hot, yummy food ready, and Dad would soon come home and give me a big hug and let me rub my face against his prickly beard. Me and Jack have so much fun, I am so glad to have a pal like Jack.



II

Highschool in a small town is a drag. Though the people are the same, their personalities have managed to change though nothing around us did. Our high school stands next to the primary school, heightening what, if anything, has really changes besides our place on a calendar. Whatever the anomaly may have been, Jack managed to tap into it. Jack and I still head down to the roundhouse; though, the amassing of rocks has changed to cans of beer and the trajectory of hand-to-train has changed to hand-to-mouth.

The roundhouse is the heart of our small town. Trains pull into the roundhouse where workers smelt, weld, repair and point trains in the right direction. On their breaks the workers, clad in denim, mount the abandoned flatcars. The sound of cracking beers and torrents of spit carry through the lower bank as thirsts are quenched and those with carious smiles spit their tobacco into make-shift spittoons. Blue

smoke surrounds the workers and, when the work bell rang, they would toss their smokes and head back into the roundhouse; the blue smoke melting into the afternoon air.

Jack and I sought shelter from the oppressive sun under an old paper birch tree, lying back, watching the workers and drinking our beers.

We live in a transit town. Thoughts of great ports and cities of interchange may spring to mind; however, we do not deal in the transit of people - rather the transit of trains. They pass through, traveling from somewhere to somewhere else or pull into the roundhouse. Thankfully, people always seem to be wanting to go from one place to another, and so our small town finds a way to survive.

I have always respected the work of the roundhouse. Jack didn't give a damn. Jack lay under the birch tree and cursed at the roundhouse and the whole town, in-between denouncements taking swigs from a silver flask he kept in his pocket. One time, Jack went as far as to say, "This whole town is pointless. The people here live sorry excuses for lives."

I don't see Jack as much as I had when we were kids. There are less laughs and all he talks about is how pointless the town and things were.

"Why do you always talk like that Jack, if it's so bad leave."

Jack started rolling a joint and pulled out a bag of small crystal-like rocks and sprinkled it throughout the herb. I don't know what it was, but when we walked home Jack hardly spoke and frantically looked about the streets with red, misty eyes. Passing his house, I noticed his Mum standing by the window, clutching a handkerchief and shaking. Jack's home probably could have done with better insulation.

III

Life has been good to me. Not long out of high school I got an apprenticeship, working under a skilled carpenter, and after a few years I got a steady job and a home out of the hinterland building houses. The small roads became wide roads, short buildings tall, and small time now a bit bigger. A girl I was going steady with in my last year of high school is now my gorgeous wife and we have a young boy. My parents helped us out with our first home. Our house stands in open light which is shepherded within and without through large window panes. The rooms are spacious enough for the three of us and our amiable neighbours make us feel like we have more space than we do. White chrysanthemums boarder our modest garden, inviting an array of birds that dance and sing in the low light of the evening. It is truly bliss. My wife's name is Susan, and she never fails to create alluring sights and smells from the kitchen that wafts through the entire neighbourhood.



With a morning coffee in hand I made my way down our pebbled path to the mail box. Neighbours wave and I take my time bathing in the morning sun; it is a morning tradition. Eventually I got to the mail box and was surprised to see a letter from Elizabeth Perdita - Jack's mother. That surprise quickly changed to anxiety, then dread. Jack had passed away.

My drink had long since been warm by the time my mind and body found cohesion over the contents of the mail. The letter contained his obituary, which had a picture of him on the front, and a note from Mrs Perdita describing the time and place of the funeral. My old-time pal – I couldn't believe it. I was in shock. The letter failed to mention how it happened, though that might have been too sensitive to send by mail. I walked back into the house and confided in Susan, sitting with her and harbouring a weight in my stomach.

To be perfectly honest, Jack and I had drifted apart since I left that rail town. Jack was getting into some messed up things, and when he wasn't spending his time deplorably you could find him strung out on some strangely abbreviated substance. I booked my train ticket and days later I was en-route.

The dry, barren countryside flew past my compartment's window and I sat staring, thinking of all the things I could have or should have done, as most people do in these situations. The rising sun stressed just how dry the land was, as the train continued to cut through the plain.

'It's a miracle anything grows out here,' I thought, pausing for a moment as my mind whirled with contemplations I fought to avoid.

'I had met Susan, and things were going well for me. I had a job and my parents were going to help me with a home. I couldn't *help* the direction I was taking. I could have spent more time with Jack. But then what would change? If I stayed in that town, I wouldn't have my boy, my beautiful wife and my beautiful home. If I had stayed what would have become of Jack?' These thoughts consumed me as I sat in my dark suit, sweating in the days unrelenting heat.

Pulling into the station, I was relieved to get outside for some fresh air. I felt ill. Only one other passenger got off here as the train speedily took off, leaving the faint sound of an engine and rattling tracks in its midst. I walked along the platform and was left dumbstruck, standing and observing what used to be my life. The

two schools stood sad, side by side; panels fallen from its façade looking as if the schools were involuntarily dropping tears.

I took a seat on the platform bench and my eyes followed the tracks as one set diverged away from the line and led to a desolate shed, overgrown with weeds – the roundhouse. Observing from a distance I couldn't see perfectly, but the building was donned with red and yellow signs that looked to convey hazard. Or the prosecution of trespass – who would protect such rickety property is beyond me. Surprisingly, I was greatly moved by this. The roundhouse had been the heart of this town, circulating trains through its railed veins. Memories of workers, yarning and joking on break, then fixing the trains and pointing them in the right direction flooded my head, as my rounded eyes stared toward the roundhouse without blinking. Wringing Jack's obituary in my hands, I remained sitting on that bench as the sun made its journey across the sky. Never blinking.

‘What if I had spent a bit more time with him, we were best friends! I should have paid more attention, I should have been there!’

The schools crying, the roundhouse withering and me staring. I couldn't go to the funeral.

It was now night. The tracks began to hum, followed by the familiar breaks of a train and two blasts of its horn that sobered me from my trance. I stood up, wet from sweat, and walked into my carriage. That was the last I saw of that town.



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I arrived home late in the night, everyone was fast asleep. I quietly walked into the house, placing my wallet and jacket on the dining table and walked into my boy's room. He looked like an angel when he slept, without a care in the world; his rest was calm itself. I drew out a pin and used it to hang Jack's obituary on the wall.

"I'm sorry Jack, I'm sorry I wasn't present."

I walked across the room and sat with my boy, running my hands through his hair.

I whispered, "Your Dad loves you so much. I will do anything and everything for you," I took a deep breath to calm my heavy insides, "you never fail to make me happy and grateful for all I have. It is my life's honour to see you grow, and guild you, into a man with a life of happiness."

I leaned in and kissed him on the forehead.

"I am so proud to be your father."

It was a clear, still night, with partial constellations blanketing the sky. I stood and stared at Jack's obituary, my boy turning over in his sleep, then made my way to bed with wet eyes as the moon that shined on us, on my old town, and on Jack's young grave, made its way below the horizon.



Max Johansson-Pugh

Max was born in London and raised in New Zealand. He gained an English scholarship out of school, attended the University of Auckland, and has since worked many jobs, from construction and bar tending to tennis coaching and running a landscaping business. He now travels in a bohemian fashion, writing, reading, gathering experience and stretching each dollar until he must find work to fill up the coffers.

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