

Perspectives



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Train Tracks

Lisa Chambers

We'd lived near the old train tracks for as long as I could remember. The rusted lines carried their passengers by every few hours. They were loud and smelly, but they were consistent. I used to sit in the small, barren paddock by our house for hours with my brother, just waiting for one to pass. Then, he would hobble closer, calling 'Choo choo, Jude!' That was before.

My mother was a single parent, so she had to leave Micky and me at home during the day. She would spend the day doing odd jobs while I looked after Micky. He was my responsibility. He depended on me; I had planned to always be there for him.

Our dad hadn't wanted to raise a son who couldn't walk properly. It should have been an omen to me; he left on the noon train.

Mum left early, sneaking past our room before sunrise. When I got up I made Micky breakfast. I helped him dress and we set off across the paddock, hand in hand, towards the creek. As my brother and I approached the thin wire fence that separated our farm from the neighbours, we picked some of the grass and slowly crept up towards their horse. I lifted Micky up so that he could feed the horse and he giggled as his hand was licked. We called her Dixie. I always took Micky past this paddock, if only because he took so much joy in Dixie's presence. Micky would never be able to ride her, but that didn't matter to us.

We moved on past the paddock, towards those ominous train tracks. Before this day they had brought us both so much joy — despite their involvement in our father's departure.

There were four rails, running parallel to each other for the length of our farm. Yet they joined together a few metres past the creek, becoming one track. I didn't understand why there was a need for four rails at one point and two at another. The concept of a train moving towards our farm didn't occur to me then, I only thought they travelled away.

Micky looked up at me with such delight in his eyes when we finally reached the creek. It wasn't very deep, due to drought. Yet this didn't stop Micky from being able to swim. I loved watching him swim, no longer hindered by legs of different lengths. It gave me such satisfaction to know that I had brought him to a place where he was able to move so freely.

I sat at the edge of the bank, feeling so adult as I watched over my brother.

The trickle of water was calming. It echoed softly as it flowed across the rocks on the edges of our pool continuing on to some distant place. The middle reflected the shining sun above us, turning its depth silver. It was magical. The wind would sweep by us, shifting the leaves in the trees, rustling the grass I sat on, sending ripples through the water around my frolicking brother. He was free to act like a normal boy in these waters.

When the air finally turned cool I called Micky from the water, not wanting him to get cold. I looked out for him that way.

Together we made our way back to the house, Micky with his hair still dripping and his clothes clinging to his damp skin.

Every time we returned from the creek we raced. I slowed my pace to accommodate his foot, and we each chose a track to run upon.

'Run, Judi!' he called, 'My choo choo beat you!'

I laughed, calling back, 'I'm catching up!'

I watched his shoulders shake as he giggled.

We didn't hear the whistle blow behind us.

Micky beat me to the intersection, hopping the final distance to take the pressure off his bad leg. I made a great show of being disappointed at my loss. While Micky continued to grin at his win, I walked to the patch of dandelions that grew in the area. It was customary for the loser to pick some for the winner.

‘Flowers!’

I was turning around again, Micky’s prize in my hands when I finally saw the train. It was coming towards us from the direction of our house.

Towards Micky.

I felt the flowers slip from my grasp. Unnoticed they fell to the ground. Micky turned to see his prize fall, his smile still upon his face. Noticing that I was looking at something else, he turned to face the train. It seemed to be moving in slow motion. Micky’s face fell as his fear took hold. He glanced at me, his face tortured.

But I was transfixed, unable to move. Paralysed by a fear so great that I felt as if my heart ceased to beat. I expected the train to make a lot of noise, yet silence seemed to echo around me. It made those seconds seem so much more daunting as Micky and I watched that train. Smoke poured from its chimney, signalling that the whistle had been pulled again, yet I heard nothing.

I could only watch as it got closer and closer to Micky, his face stricken.

The one moment where I truly needed to be there for my brother and instead of acting I was sunk within the depths of my own fear, leaving him alone. My guilt consumed me. My eyes misted, clogged by tears gathering under lids that couldn’t close. They were fixed on the train bearing down on the brother I had sworn to protect...

As if in a nightmare I watched the machine as it hovered mere centimetres away from my brother. His face at that moment will be etched into my mind for eternity. His mouth trembled, his eyes so wide they seemed to take over the expanse of his face. There was a loud click and then ...

... the train continued past Micky on the parallel track.

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All I could do was stand there and watch it pass us. My pulse pounded in my ears now. The whistle of the train sounded and the clanking of the train's gears seemed to pull me from my daze. Micky was safe. The words repeated over and over in my mind.

Yet, the feelings of guilt remained. It had settled in the back of my mind, planting itself within me for ever. I had failed to come to my little brother's aid in the one instance it would truly count. It did not matter that nothing bad had happened. I would live with this knowledge, this failure, for the rest of my life.

The last carriage of the train passed ... there stood Micky. His face lit up as he saw me once more, not noticing my stricken expression.

In his innocence he couldn't comprehend the gravity of those last few moments. The effects they would have on the rest of my life. He merely grinned, unabashedly, his face so open and joyous as he watched the train speed away, his hand outstretched as he pointed to it.

'Choo choo!'



Lisa Chambers wrote this in 2008 when she was in Year 12 at Kew High School in Victoria.