

The Engineer

by MJA Smith

Jack Smart had worked for Pater Fabrications Ltd for 46 years, precisely the same length of the time that the company itself had been in existence. 'Had it really been so long?' pondered Jack, holding in his hand the tiny, handwritten payslip given to him at the end of his very first week on the job.

He remembered that day like it was yesterday, wished that it in fact *were* yesterday in some ways. He had been standing there, dutifully sweeping the invasive swarf into a metal bucket as the great pressing machine, turned off half an hour before, pinged and popped rhythmically as it cooled. Even after just five days as a machine apprentice there on the factory floor, Jack knew his evening duties inside out; even more attentively, in his head Jack was beginning to learn the precise length of the gaps between the metallic sounds of the sleeping machine. A few years later, when Jack had apprentices of his own, he called this 'knowing your machine', detailing the minute nuances of each and every piece of heavy equipment on the shop floor. Most of the young apprentices he had trained over the years initially regarded his belief in this as over-zealous and anally-retentive – he could tell by the raised eyebrows and rolled eyes, those telling gestures you normally catch out of the corner of your eye. Their disdain for his methods didn't faze Jack. All it usually took was a burnt hand on a hot machine part or piece of hot swarf painfully hitting the white of an eye before they realised why Jack's stringent ministrations were so very important. And besides, all but one of Jack's apprentices had gone on to become a foreman or factory manager; two of his lads were still with Pater Fabrications, which he still felt proud of. Jack thought briefly of the one apprentice who didn't go on to have a decent engineering career, stiffened a little and took another glance at his first payslip. He even smiled, just a little wistfully.

There he had been, sweeping the tiny fragments of brass into his bucket with his wooden-handled brush, dutifully ensuring that each and every scrap on the press found its way into bucket. After that, he would begin sweeping around the base of the machine. In that first week the machines were new, still being run in, still shiny and barely any oil could be found on the floor of the factory. They were great, proud beasts of machines, all curved and shiny, monolithic monuments of a new era of Great British manufacturing, silver plates screwed to the upper structure boldly stating that they had been made in England. Jack had kept one of these plaques when they took these great beasts out of service many years later and replaced them with more compact machines imported from Germany; he knew exactly where he'd find that plaque. It was in his first toolbox, brought with him on his first day at Pater Fabrications Ltd. It was at the back of his garage.

'Good work, Jack,' said a voice behind him, just slightly catching him unawares, so much so that he almost lost his grip on the swarf bucket. Mr Pater was there, holding out the small brown envelope which contained his payslip and first wage. Jack wiped his brush hand on his blue overalls, took the envelope from Mr Pater's outstretched hand, thanked him and put it in the pocket of his overalls. He hadn't opened the envelope until he was outside the factory and halfway home. It had felt like a fortune back then, of course. He'd felt so proud when he put the money on the table back home for his rent and food. His mother had ruffled his hair while his father had clapped him on his back proudly.

Over the next few years Jack had slavishly grafted at the factory, making few friends from among his colleagues, and pursuing his singular approach to getting the job done. You wouldn't find him nipping off the floor to huddle outside and take intense drags on roll-ups like most of his colleagues did. Ever the loner, Jack – never a particularly well-read man by his own admission – would spend his lunch breaks in a corner of the tearoom reading crime novels and drinking tomato soup from a Thermos.

Mr Pater, who bestowed upon him a supervisor's role after three years at the firm, noted his commitment, tenacity and fastidiousness. When Jack's parents died in quick succession, he had taken on their house and started working Saturdays, plus the odd night shift, to make ends meet.

He started taking responsibility for training the new apprentices, invariably kids from the local college who didn't know what they wanted to do with themselves, and most of whom had little or no interest in working in a factory. He managed to turn most of them around, but one had slipped through. He was a

second-generation Polish kid who just hadn't shown any commitment at all from day one; Jack and him had come to blows one day, which had prompted Mr Pater to haul Jack into his office for a dressing down. He'd been there thirty years by then, had received nothing but praise from the owner, but then and there, at the age of forty-six, Jack felt like a kid again. When the same apprentice lost his right arm and most of his left hand in one of the machines he sued Pater Fabrications and specifically cited Jack – and a supposed lack of care, due diligence and training on Jack's part – in his case. Pater had settled and the lad was handsomely compensated, but nothing could compensate for the lack of trust Mr Pater had for Jack from then on.

Within twelve months old man Pater had died, his son had taken over, the old machines had been replaced with new ones operated by computers and a new, youthful foreman had been brought in; Jack struggled to gain the trust of Pater junior. Despite his efforts to retrain he just couldn't get the hang of the computers and the foreman and he could never see eye to eye. Jack went from being the much-praised, respected face and backbone of the shop floor to being a bit of a nuisance to everyone concerned, but no one could find a way to get him to move on. For Jack, with retirement on the horizon, and never having worked anywhere else, he had no desire to look for another job, and so the old and new faces of the factory tolerated one another uneasily, the latter scoring off the days until he left, the former minding his own business and trying to avoid too much conflict.

Which brings us back to today, Jack Smart's last day at the firm. He'd spent the morning fixing a machine that had broken down the night before. Just as he was wiping his hands on a rag, he'd felt a tap on his shoulder, just as he had at the end of his first week. He'd expected to turn around and see old man Pater, but instead it was his son. He took him out for lunch at a pub on the nearby housing estate. They had little to say to one another. When they returned to the factory he received a presentation for his service, they gave him a round of applause, then Jack went upstairs and began emptying his locker into a cardboard box. He left without saying goodbye and drove home.

Retiring wasn't quite the event he'd always thought it was. He'd grown tired of working at the firm, but he'd clung onto retiring to get him through the past few years of relative isolation and solitude at work. Instead of feeling elated, he felt deflated, empty, lost somehow. At home he put the box in the garage next to his first toolbox, took a can of lager from the fridge in the kitchen and sat himself in his favourite armchair and for the first time in his adult life wondered what he was going to do with himself. He had no hobbies, the house and garden were as he wanted them to be and his wife wouldn't be retiring for another five years; the kids had long since moved away – one had emigrated to Australia, the other lived a couple of hours away – and he had no friends or relatives left in this town.

Far from feeling relaxed, Jack was suddenly more stressed than at any time in his working life. Stress gave way to fear; fear gave way to panic; panic gave way to pains in his chest and a sudden shortage of breath.

Maureen came home from work three hours later to find her husband slumped in his chair. She initially thought he'd fallen asleep, and playful attempts to wake him turned to panicked shakes and shrieks of disbelief as she couldn't revive him.

Her husband, so reluctant to express his feelings about anything, but mostly on the subject of work, had balked at the idea of doing something – anything – to celebrate leaving the firm that had held sway over his life from his teenage years, but she was keen to mark the occasion somehow, however low key that might need to be.

She had gone out at lunchtime and trekked the half a mile or so from the office to the supermarket, where she'd bought two steaks, and a bottle of champagne, two things Jack's parsimony would have ordinarily caused her to look away from in favour of something cheaper. Still in the alcohol aisle, she picked up a bottle of whiskey, a drink Jack enjoyed only occasionally. She held the bottle with its honey-coloured liquid within in her hands for several minutes, agonising over whether to buy it or not, but was suddenly faced with a tremor of panic that she didn't know her husband's tastes sufficiently well, even after this long, to know with conviction what to buy him as a present.

A shop worker's enquiry as to whether she needed any assistance woke her from her thoughts, and finally she decided to buy the whiskey, put it carefully in her basket and paid.

During the afternoon a certain levity entered her mood and she began to look forward to the end of the day and an exciting new phase of her marriage to Jack. She rather hoped he would have been outside her building waiting for her to finish work, to symbolise his new freedom, and also so that she didn't have to lug

the heavy shopping bags up the hill to their home, but as she scanned the car park a few minutes after five o'clock he was nowhere to be seen. She felt momentarily deflated, but reasoned that Jack was probably coming to terms with retirement, or that he'd have relented and gone to the pub after work with the people that he couldn't bring himself to see as friends, even after so many years in their company.

Theirs had been a typical marriage in many respects, driven by a utility and convenience in recent years that was normal for a couple that had been together for so long. To the outside world theirs was a union of considerable strength, but Maureen saw it differently. She found living with Jack difficult, sometimes unbearably so. His bouts of introversion and pessimism, always prompted by some event or other at work, were frustrating to the point where she had considered leaving him several times. She had never said that to anyone, but she had felt it far too often during their long marriage.

Events at Jack's work had ultimately become the focus of their collective attentions, but he would never open up to her and tell her why it was that he suffered so, or what specifically had happened during the course of his day or week. She had read about the grisly and grievous departure of one of his apprentices in a local paper, and Jack had never said a word to her about it. On the one hand she was relieved that she had found a reason to explain the dark mood he had brought into their family home. She tried and tried in vain to coax out of him the many things that brought him so low, but his exterior was impenetrable. Though they talked continually, they never went near the issues that dominated their marriage.

Maureen had desperately wanted to tell him about the problems she endured in her own career, the difficulties she had faced when bringing up their two sons and the weight of pressure she'd felt when she moved into his parents' house or the discomfort and worthlessness she'd felt at the onset of the menopause. But Jack's work, his vomiting in the locked bathroom at the start of every new week and his general depressed self-absorption put paid to this. And so she suffered in silence whilst trying selflessly to make his life easier, resenting him almost as much as she still adored him.

After years of emotional solitude following both their sons moving out of the family house in relatively quick succession, she began to pin her hopes on Jack's retirement as the panacea to their marital issues. She looked to the future and saw a time where his work disappeared out of focus and the tender, emotionally accessible man she'd met all those moons ago returned to her. She imagined long holidays spent rediscovering their common ground, and finding pleasure in physical intimacy after years of sporadic, functional and passionless embraces.

The coroner told her he'd suffered a massive heart attack. She'd long suspected that the stress he put himself through for the sake of his job would destroy his health, and she would, in time, see the irony in the fact that his heart had waited until the very day of his retirement to pack up on them.