

Twilight

Sometime before sunrise in the twilight of the Age of Steam, in the cold of a bitter Wyoming winter, a westbound freight train of four diesel-electric locomotives and eighty freight cars started up Sherman Hill between Cheyenne and Laramie, the steepest grade on the Union Pacific Line. Before he'd gone two miles, the lead engineer knew he needed help. Even the big steam locomotives struggled on this grade, and with frost on the rails, he didn't think his diesels could do it without help. So he stopped the train and called the freight dispatcher on the radio.

Before long, he saw a smoldering headlamp coming up the hill behind him, and a hissing, breathing mass of black steel soon coupled itself to the back of his train: a 4-8-4 Northern, Number 845. A few minutes later, they started up again, but this time, the train had 64,000 pounds of steam-driven tractive power behind it.

At the top, they stopped and waited while the brakemen climbed down to uncouple 845. The lead engineer called back to town and told the dispatcher he was up the hill. Just then, the morning sun broke over the eastern horizon, and as the long train started west again, he looked back toward the sunrise, the rails stretching back toward Cheyenne in bands of glimmering

steel, and the giant steam locomotive sitting motionless on the tracks behind him.

Two miles west of the main Cheyenne depot, Mike Donallson parked his old Ford in the grass outside Tower A. He looked at his watch. The hands read 6:42 AM. As he got out, the frigid air stung his exposed neck and face, and he pulled his scarf a little closer as he banged the door shut behind him. He was sick of winter. He'd been sick of summer and autumn the year before. In a few months, he'd be sick of spring. He'd been sick of everything since the war.

Inside the tower - more like half a tower, really - he helped himself to a cup of coffee from the kettle on the little stove. He heard the tower operator walk across the floor upstairs. Good old Casey had probably made the coffee for him. Mike started for the stairs, took a sip, and burned his tongue. He cursed under his breath. Then he shook his head. He'd reached the point where he was cursing over coffee.

"Mornin' Harry," said the tower operator, without looking, as Mike stepped out of the stairwell into the control room.

"It's Mike, Casey. Pa's in Omaha."

"At the convention," the old man said, turning from the control board to give Mike a friendly smile. "So you're yardmaster for two weeks."

"Lucky me," Mike said.

From Tower A, the operator controlled all the switches leading into the twisting maze of freight yards back in town. Since the war, since he decided not to go back to Laramie and finish his degree, Mike had been working for Union Pacific under his father, and had risen to become the assistant yardmaster of the Cheyenne yard. Every afternoon, he drove out to Tower A to make sure the switches were lined up for the afternoon's freight traffic. Mike's father normally did it in the morning, but Harry was five hundred miles away at UP headquarters. So instead of spending the morning in his nice, quiet office in the depot, Mike got to come out to Tower A and freeze.

He set down his coffee below the control board and fished the yard schedule for that day out of his pocket. The dispatcher would want the switches set by seven. On the schedule, a neatly-drawn chart stretched down the page, listing each of the trains in the yard, where they would be, and at what time. Mike glanced down the list, then over at the control board, a huge maze of lights and black lines that sat below the east-facing windows. Each line was a track in the freight yards. Each light was a switch. Every light had to match the paper in his hands.

They all did. Casey knew the schedule so well he'd set them all already. As usual, what Mike did made no difference.

People talked about him, and he knew what they said. *The war did something to him. He's the opposite of shell-shocked. He thinks civilian life is boring. He should have stayed in the Marines.* Mike didn't bother lying, to himself, to his father, or to his mother and the other gossips. He felt the truth in what they said - partial truth, perhaps, but truth all the same.

He didn't miss the war, the noise, the dirt, the blood, the dying. He didn't miss the long nights on some hot, God-forsaken island in the Pacific. But he did miss the sense of purpose. During the war, he felt something he'd never experienced before in his young life: the feeling he was doing something that mattered.

That's what he couldn't seem to find - not in college, not at home, not with people he knew. He worked with his father because he had nothing else to do. He was good at his job; the superintendent wouldn't have let him take his father's place for these few weeks if he weren't.

But that didn't make it less pointless, and as he sipped his coffee and stared at the sunrise, he wondered how much longer he could keep it up.

The locomotive hissed softly in the cold, its great drive wheels squealing in protest as it creaked to a stop in front of the little depot at Borie - not really a depot, but an overgrown

shack with a long roof, two doors, two windows, and an orchard of telephone and telegraph poles outside. Inside, the middle-aged operator turned a page in the previous day's Cheyenne paper without looking up. He'd received the call a few minutes ago: 845 returning light eastbound to Cheyenne would stop to sign for a Form 31, which he would find in the top drawer of his roll top desk. He'd give it to the engineer and receive the man's signature. The Northern would have her orders, and the operator would have the rest of the morning to finish his newspaper.

Droplets of water ran down the massive rods on either side of 845, and the sheen sparkled brightly on the eight huge drive wheels. The locomotive stood in a veil of steam, exhaling slowly in a long, continuous breath. Its distinctive headlamp smoldered in the center of its boiler above the Union Pacific shield, white smoke still leaking from the stack behind the gleaming bell. Then it spoke, its deep, throaty whistle ringing loudly in the morning air. The calm felt empty when its voice faded.

But railroad men knew the steam locomotive wasn't *it*, but *she*. They knew mankind had never come so close to building something alive. How else could one describe something that breathed when it moved and panted when it rested, blew steam in the frigid cold and glistened with sweat in the heat of summer? Men who ran the rails knew locomotives could be more fickle than

any woman. They'd worked with engines they loved and engines they hated, and with engines that loved and hated them.

The men who'd worked with 845 had seen the golden age of the great steam locomotives. She'd hauled passengers from the Dust Bowl states across the plains of Wyoming to better fortune in the west. She'd hauled freight trains and coal trains east to Omaha, and the great cities beyond. She'd raced across the plains at eighty miles-an-hour pulling yellow UP coaches full of passengers bound for the glitz and glamour of California. She'd taken young men west to war.

But the age of the diesel electric had come. Like the other mighty giants of the past, 845 now spent her days quietly in the roundhouse, except at times like this, when she steamed out to push a freight train up the hill, helping the very machines that had authored her demise.

Now she stood motionless on the rails while the engineer climbed down to go and sign for the Form 31. In former days, a train order like this might have had her pulling an express train west to Salt Lake City. Now, the order simply allowed her to remain on the main line for half an hour while traffic in the freight yards cleared. After a minute or so, the engineer came out of the depot, and called up to the fireman in the cab. *I've got the flimsy. Gotta wait here half an hour for the yard to clear up. Come on in and have a cup of joe.*

It was against the regulations, and regular crews riding steam knew the regulations existed for good reason. But this wasn't a regular crew. 845 didn't have a regular crew anymore. When he sent her out that morning, the freight dispatcher assigned the first two men he could find. They knew how to run her. They didn't know *her*.

Still, the fireman hesitated. He knew better. But finally, he climbed down. Even with the firebox right below the cab, with the engine standing still, it was getting cold inside. The thought of standing by a hot stove with a cup of coffee in the depot was too much for him. A moment later, the two railroad men had disappeared inside.

845 stood motionless on the rails outside, still hissing steam, glistening with condensation along her massive boiler. Deep within, the fire continued to burn, the steam pressure that had pushed eighty freight cars up Sherman Hill continued to build. Nothing but the throttle, in the empty cab, held it back.

Perhaps the engineer hadn't closed the throttle all the way. Perhaps the pressure forced it open.

Inside the depot, the operator turned another page of his day-old paper, and the railroad men waited for the kettle to boil.

In Tower A, the telephone rang. Casey answered it. A moment later, he offered Mike the receiver.

"It's the dispatcher," the old man said, a hint of urgency cutting through his voice.

"Donallson. Mike Donallson," he added.

"Mike, this is Chuck Nolan," the dispatcher said. "We've got trouble. A Northern got away at Borie - 845. She's comin' down Sherman Hill with no one in the cab. We want to derail her east of town. If we can't clear the main line, we'll have to send her through the yards. I need you to line up some switches and give me a clear path through the freight yards. You understand?"

"Yes sir," Mike said.

"Give me Casey again. Hurry, Mike. We don't have much time."

Mike passed the earpiece back to Casey. He turned back to the control board and fished the yard schedule out of his pocket again. He didn't try to force away the surge of excitement. Chuck Nolan's phone call filled him with something he hadn't felt since Okinawa.

Mike looked down at the control board, at the twisting maze of lines and lights representing the Cheyenne freight yards. He needed a line of lights running all the way through, beginning with the main line at the west end of the rail yard, ending with

the main line at the east end. He glanced at his watch. The hands read 7:03 AM.

Casey hung up the phone and crossed the control room to the switchboard, where dozens of levers awaited his command. Each lever triggered a switch somewhere in the yard. Mike gave Casey the number of the first switch he wanted, and Casey pulled the lever. On the control board, the bulb at the far right lit up.

Now things got interesting. Mike needed to line up empty track, and in the freight yards, it was hard to come by. But Harry Donallson had made his son memorize the layout of the yard and every schedule. The yardmaster had to know exactly what was happening all the time.

"What happened?" Mike asked, giving Casey another number.

"Pickin' up a flimsy at Borie," Casey growled, pulling another switch as Mike gave him the number. "Both men left the cab. In a Northern! The idiots! Everyone knows Northerns have fussy throttles! My grandson knows Northerns have fussy throttles!"

"Fussy throttles?"

"When you're riding a Northern, you gotta be careful with the throttle," Casey explained. "You give her what she needs and she takes too much. You ease back and she tries to stop hard. You drop your guard for a second and she leaps ahead."

"But what happened at Borie?" Mike asked, giving Casey another number. Slowly, a line of lights began to snake across the board.

"Somehow the throttle slipped open," Casey answered angrily. "Once the throttle valve opened, the steam pressure inside just pushed it wider and wider."

"Eighteen," Mike said. "Fourteen. Thirty. So we have a runaway Northern rolling down Sherman Hill."

"She's not rolling," the old man said. "She's running."

Mike looked at Casey for a minute. He looked at the line of lights on the control board. Then he glanced at his watch. 7:05 AM.

"Borie's ten miles from here," he said. "It'll take it a while to get going. Say it averages forty or fifty between Borie and the yard. That gives us ten more minutes. Should be enough."

"Mike," Casey began softly, a strange sort of reverence stealing the gruffness from his voice. "She won't stop at forty or fifty. She'll just run faster and faster until she tears herself apart. Only she knows how soon she'll get here. But it'll be a lot sooner than twelve minutes."

Mike looked at the board again. He was a long way from having a clear path from one end of the freight yard to the other.

"I hope Chuck's got the main line open," he said. "Fifty. Thirteen. Let's figure this out."

He could do this. He'd been waiting three years for the chance to make a difference. He'd waited three years for the chance to feel alive again. Now he had it.

He also had problems. Halfway through the freight yard, he'd run out of track. The morning mail train stood between his string of lights and a clear path back to the main line. That meant he had to send the Northern through one of the staging areas. But an oil train that had pulled in the night before hadn't been broken down yet, and it was blocking one of them. Half of Mike's options were completely gone, and because of the oil train, the other staging area was packed. To get the Northern through, Mike needed something moved.

"Call Chuck," he said. "Tell him to move 6758. I don't care where it goes. I just need it out of the way."

"No time," Casey answered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Smoke," the old man told him.

Mike froze. He turned and saw a faint, gray-black stain spreading across the pale pink in the western sky, racing across the snow toward them like a lit fuse.

"She's comin' fast," Casey said. "She's comin' real fast, Mike."

"Get Chuck on the phone," Mike said.

It rang before Casey could move, and Mike grabbed the receiver. He heard a rush of excited voices, and then Chuck Nolan's.

"It's yours Mike. The main line's jammed. We have to send her into the freight yard."

"What?" he asked. "I can't get it through!"

"It's either the yard or the North Platte sleeper right in front of the depot. Passengers are boarding, and there's no engine yet. I've already thrown the switch."

"I can't get it through," Mike repeated. "I'll have to wreck it in a siding. Staging B. Get everyone out of there."

"Two minutes!" Casey shouted. "Maybe less. I've never seen anything coming this fast."

"Get that yard clear," Mike told the dispatcher.

"I'll try," Chuck said. Then the line went dead.

Mike looked at the yard schedule again. The hands of his watch read 7:07 AM. Smoke filled the Western sky.

"All right. Sixty. Sixty-two. Sixty-four. We'll put it through an empty siding and wreck it into those old boxcars back there."

"I can't pull the switch," Casey told him.

"What?"

"Sixty. The one I need to pull to get her into your empty siding and your boxcars. The lever won't move. There's a train there, Mike."

"But why..." Mike began. He didn't finish. Casey was right. Yesterday afternoon, Mike had scheduled a drag freight to occupy that stretch of track. The crew would be aboard, waiting for the main line to open up.

That was it. From the main line, he had two ways to get the wild Northern into the staging yards where it could smash itself into the empty freight cars and do no harm. The mail train blocked one. The drag freight blocked the second. His other choice was to hit the oil train. He tried to picture the explosion and he saw the war again, the blackened corpses, the gutted vehicles. Hitting that much oil would destroy the staging yard and kill dozens of yard workers.

He had nowhere to go. He left the control board and looked out the east windows, toward the sunrise, toward the city of Cheyenne as it shook itself awake, toward the automobiles rushing over the railroad tracks on the Riner Viaduct, toward the distant spire of the depot. He imagined the passengers chatting on the front platform and waving goodbye to friends and family members as they stepped up into the shining yellow coaches, the ones with the red UNION PACIFIC gleaming proudly above the windows. He imagined the freight yards, quiet except

for the bustle of postal clerks, or crewmen warming up their machines. None of them knew what was coming. None of them knew that two fellow railroad men had violated federal law and UP operating procedure by leaving a steam locomotive unattended. None of them knew the locomotive was racing toward the yard, and that no one could stop it or steer it away. *Please God, Chuck, get that yard clear!*

"Who do you want me to hit?" Mike asked quietly.

"No one wants you to hit anything," Casey told him.

"If I leave it the way it is, I hit that drag freight. That way, I hit the mail train. That way, I hit enough oil to blow the entire staging yard to pieces. I can't send it around the staging areas because I have trains blocking every track. If I had more time..."

"You don't have more time, Mike. You gotta throw the switches now."

The acting yardmaster turned slowly, his frenzy and focus turned to helpless despair, a thousand thoughts burning in his mind. He wished he'd never come to work for the railroad. He wished he'd never left the Marines. He wished he'd never joined the Marines. Most of all, he wished his father hadn't gone to Omaha. Then Harry Donallson, not his son, would be the one standing here in Tower A, the one who had to send a runaway locomotive into his freight yards.

But Harry was in Omaha, and Mike stood with the choice in his hands. He'd wanted this. He'd wanted to make a difference. He'd wanted to do something meaningful. He couldn't stop now.

"Twenty-two," he decided, pointing to one of the lights. Casey jerked the lever down. A small light bulb blazed to life. Somewhere in the yard, steel slid across the railroad ties, closing one path and opening another.

"The 7:10 is usually late," he said. "I've seen it come out as late as 7:30. If it's late today, that track is open, and we can get her into that siding."

"I'll call and find out," Casey said.

Mike said nothing. He pulled two more levers. If the 7:10 was late, he had open track into the siding. If not, there was nothing he could do. He dropped the yard schedule on the floor and turned toward the west.

A choking streak of black smoke trailed flat behind the racing Northern. From the control room, 845 looked like one of the little engines on the electric train layout his father had set up in the basement - not because the distance made it look small, but because it was moving too fast to be a real locomotive. Mike couldn't even decide how far away it might be, because it grew so quickly in his vision that it outran every estimation. He couldn't even focus his eyes on it long enough to guess.

But now it was close, and he saw it, tearing along the main line toward the tower at unthinkable speed, its yellowish headlamp blazing brightly in the center of the boiler. The smoke stretched thin behind it, like a rubber band pulled tight against the morning sky. The enormous drive rods and wheels raced beneath it in a frenzied blur. It rushed toward the tower, exploding out of distance and into detail, and thundered past in the blink of an eye. The floorboards shook in violent protest; the switchboard rattled dangerously. Mike stumbled across the room, back to the board and the east-facing windows, and watched the locomotive shrink into the waking city until he lost it in the smoke. Somewhere, maybe half a mile away, it streaked past a westbound freight, drawing a flurry of angry horn blasts from the lead engineer in his diesel electric. The silent Northern did not respond.

"Mike," Casey said. "The 7:10 is right on time."

"Oh," Mike answered. He looked at his watch. The hands read 7:09 AM.

In his mind, he saw the passengers on the platform turn to look, their eyes wide with sudden excitement. He heard the autos on Lincolnway honking wildly as the frenzied locomotive tore past them. He saw confused expressions flashing on dozens of faces in the freight yard.

Mike blinked. The images fled, leaving the acting yardmaster staring at smoke and empty rails. The world was silent. Then came the crash.

Mike Donallson stood alone in front of the west-facing windows of Tower A, his eyes fastened on the distant ridge and the base of Sherman Hill, his back to the city and the distant rail yard. A westbound freight lumbered slowly out of town beside him, four diesel locomotives barely visible at the head. The wind raced across the snow-covered sage, and tossed the hanging power lines back and forth among the forest of poles on either side of the tracks. Autos sped along west Lincolnway out of town, toward Laramie and Rawlins. Behind the former Marine, an assistant tower operator carefully lined up the switches so an eastbound passenger train could pull up to the depot.

Mike heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and he turned to look. Casey Smith filled the doorway, tears glistening on his leathery cheeks, his blue eyes burning brightly. The two men stood for a moment, the old railroad man and the young man who had hoped for trouble, the old man who had pulled the switch and the young man who had given the order. A quivering voice broke the silence.

"She smashed the crummy to pieces," Casey said. "The conductor and the rear-end brakeman were eating breakfast inside."

"They both died?"

"Nine hundred thousand pounds of metal hit them at a hundred thirty miles-an-hour," the old man whispered. "There's not much left."

"Families?"

Casey nodded.

"What else - besides the caboose?" Mike asked, stammering over the words as he fought back tears of his own. He hadn't cried since VJ Day.

"A few of the cars."

"What about the Northern?"

"Mangled," Casey said. "She's scrap metal."

"I wanted a chance to do something important," Mike murmured slowly, not entirely certain whether he wanted Casey to hear him or not. "I wanted a chance like this. So what do I do when I get it? I cost two men their lives and the Union Pacific a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"No one's blaming you, Mike."

"I blame myself," he said. "I've been trying to make a difference since I left the service. Every day, I wake up and

think to myself that if I just get the chance, I can do something that matters. I was wrong. I failed."

"The only ones who failed are the enginemen who left the Northern alone at Borie," Casey told him, covering one of Mike's shoulders with a big hand. "That's something you gotta learn about working on the railroad, Mike. We all make a difference all the time. We all help each other out. It's a lot like the Army. As long as we all do our job and do it right, everything goes fine. But when somebody doesn't hold the line, people get hurt. Don't blame yourself for somebody else's mistake. It wasn't your fault."

"You were in the Army?" Mike asked.

"I was a Dough Boy," Casey answered, his eyes sparkling through the glistening tears. "I know how hard it is to come home and pick up the pieces of the life you left behind. You feel like you don't matter anymore. But when you work on the railroad, you do matter. Everything you do is important, Mike. Everything you do makes a difference. I know it's not as obvious as fighting a war. But every evening when you leave the yard and everything ran on time and nobody got hurt, you've done something worthwhile. You've made a difference."

Mike stood without moving as the old railroad man replaced his assistant at the control board again. Finally, he went down the stairs and out the door. He had work to do.

Sometime after sunset in the twilight of the Age of Steam, a thin sliver of moon rose slowly in the eastern sky, and shone down on the small Union Pacific depot at Borie. Inside, the operator shoved a few more logs into the wood-burning stove and finished reading that day's Cheyenne paper. His relief would arrive in a couple of hours, but he had to stay awake until then. His eyes strayed across the small room to the coffee pot on the stove. He shook his head. He didn't think he'd make coffee again for a long time.

Ten miles to the east, headlights rushed over the Riner Viaduct and the Union Pacific yard beneath it. Some of the drivers had heard the radio reports, but they didn't quite understand what had happened. They couldn't see anything in the rail yard except the head lamp of a westbound locomotive, and that didn't warrant much attention.

In the dim light of the meager moon and shimmering stars, Mike Donallson stood alone in front of the roundhouse, his breath a cloud of steam as it leaked out into the cold. After a few minutes, he went in, stepping over the tracks with practiced ease. Darkness filled the roundhouse, broken only by the faint glimmer of shining steel. The giants rose above him on all sides, motionless, silent, and forgotten. Stillness clung to the great drive wheels, the massive cylinders, the graceful

pistons and driving rods. One by one their faces filled his vision. One by one they slipped into the shadows.

He found himself beside a Northern, its distinctive smoke-lifters - what railroad men called "elephant ears" - giving a squarish look to the front of its boiler. Seeing this one now, so close, so quiet, sent chills racing up and down his spine. An image filled his mind, an image of a Northern like this one, its drive wheels a frantic blur beneath it, smoke streaking behind it as it raced toward him through the frigid morning.

Mike reached up and ran his fingers along the smooth steel of one of the drivers, and felt grains of cold frost on the gleaming steel. He had seen steam locomotives before, but never the way he'd seen 845 that morning: fast, free, and wild - so wild she shattered herself and cost two men their lives. *She?* Older men gave locomotives the endearing term, but Mike never had. So why now?

"Because they aren't just machines," he murmured. "They're almost alive."

But being alive means some day you have to die. Mike felt a sudden sadness. The railroad had abandoned the steam locomotive, just as the enginemen had abandoned 845 at Borie that morning. The diesel electric had come to stay, forcing its giant companions into the shadows of obscurity and uselessness. In their infancy, steam locomotives had joined a nation, east to

west. In their heyday, the great steam engines had taken passengers across the continent and transported the weapons of war from one coast to the other. Today, they helped freight trains up Sherman Hill. Tomorrow, they would sit rusting in scrap yards, useless hulks of rusted metal, clinging to only the faintest shadows of their former glory.

Yet that glory had not entirely passed. In a way, the abandoned Northern, Number 845, had given her species one last cry, one moment of fury and power that would burn forever in the minds of anyone who had seen it, one last reminder of a bygone age and the majestic creatures who ruled it.

The age of the great locomotives had drawn to a close. Soon the last whistle would echo mournfully across the open prairie and the last fire would fizzle and die. But Mike knew they would never really be gone. They would live on, ghosts in the memory of anyone who had seen them riding high. Their voices would haunt these yards and rails forever, until finally the railroad itself became a thing of the past, and faded slowly into the western sunset like a departing train.

Tom Szott, 2007