

Drainmen Ch.4

by RW Spryszak

Beyond the rising curtain and the edge of the building I pass every day is a round, fat tower dwarfing all the other ancient and more modern structures around it. The same tower I see every day and have tried to describe to you again and again with no luck. It's an old building. A tower that belongs in medieval days. Not the days of shopping bags and cars. Probably built during the times of the Vikings. Yellowish red but not orange. Tall, but squat with a crown of crenelations ringing the very top. It plays tricks with my stomach because I know the degree of difficulty it presents to our crew, and no one knows what happens if we fail in our work. In fact it makes my stomach feel like a mixer with everything churned up inside giving off bubbles of dead gas. Forgotten gas about to be remembered. A crawling finger rubbing the inside of my guts. Audible. As if it was about to burst through my skin.

The tower haunts a dream now and again, though I can't recall an exact detail of any dream that I can explain to you. All I know is what I see. I've watched it so long it may as well be alive. Like a person. There is you. There is me. There are the people we know. And there is the tower. A natural progression in the mind. Usual.

Of course it's not just the tower that feeds my lifelong anxiety. A tower is a tower. It's a thing built by humans. A structure. It's just a tower until something happens to make it something else. Like an expression on a face. It's our job. Our task is, I feel, more the source of my wild nerves than anything else.

At the base of this old, fat tower is a steam engine. A locomotive. Black and mighty from the days of the heavy monster trains. The kind that could pull a hundred cars up a mountain. The experts call it a 2-6-2 because of the wheel alignment. But black and dormant now, trapped by an intricate web of ropes and hooks and cables that

collect into four distinct groupings that all rise to the sky along the tower wall until they all connect to the high point pulleys of four mammoth cranes that huff smoke from the overworked, thin exhaust pipes of their diesel engines. A tiger of growling gears and wild buzzing generators as the cranes work like frustrated demons to lift the locomotive off the street..

We are in day 16 of the lift. We have many more days yet to go before we will finish our work. Our mission. Our orders. We will lift this old steam locomotive to the top of the tower. We will skillfully pass over the crenelations without loosening a brick and move it to the center of the tower's flat top, where we will set it down once and for all and forever. To place this old black locomotive, still covered in dust and rust, on the top of this ancient, squat tower, would be the ultimate achievement. Our job, after all. And we are up to the task.

I will admit, though, that after 16 days I am already tired of having to appear to respect the Engineers. I'm tired of having to be nice to my fellow workers - a dull-witted, simple-minded lot. I care about my work. I try to do my job to the best of my ability. I care about my performance. But I am fed up with the useless orders given for things we already know need to be done and the idiots who give them. I am sick of having to be somewhere I don't want to be at a time specified by somebody else. The same faces. The same conversations. I make believe I am listening, but I know that sometimes my answers don't match the conversation. I can see the look on people's faces when they realize I'm paying them no mind as they blabber. I make believe I care. I mark days off the calendar with careful and precise X's, even if I don't know why. I would like to see Mars through a child's telescope. I would like to fly with the birds.

When I think of the time wasted here, even though I give them my best effort, I feel I should rightfully be embarrassed. Besides getting me the money I need to eat, this job really has no other benefit. It doesn't fill me with pride. There is accomplishment, but it's the

Engineers who get the praise, the glory, and the pay. And my fellow workers are in my world only because the trap of time. Outside of this thing we do I would never know them or want to know them. There is an aspect of fascism in the moving calendar. Always ticking. Days moving along in an unconscious stream. The little pains and the petty squabbles. The hierarchies, real and imagined. The jockeying for position or for ease. No one really wants to be here. We just want to eat. To feed our families.

People can try to convince themselves that they are above the working day. But, in the end, the reality is that they profess not to care but complain about others not caring enough. They are troubled by their workload but enjoy the sight of someone else being overworked. And the Engineers feed the discord to exact their control over us. They do nothing to salve-over the jealousies. It keeps us from organizing ourselves against them. In this the Engineers have long ago proven their devious superiority. It is unpatriotic to organize, to ask for wages, to strike. Never mind your pay envelope, look at the threat to your leisure from "over there." The Engineers are smarter than us, when all is said and done. They are burdened with nothing. No conscience at all, while our subservience is underpinned with airy gods and Bronze Age Commandments.

I hardly speak to my fellow workers. Not even the other Drainmen. I am tired of the traps they lay for each other in their games. Tired of them going against their own interests again and again and thinking it a manly virtue. I come and I do my work and then I go. I make enough to eat and then I leave.

Yet here I am, crawling day after day through the same waterlogged tunnel. Relieved to be out of that wet stink and able to see, again, the cold shadow of the tower even in the ever-present rain. Able to sense the grease, the oil, and the wet iron smell of the locomotive. The majesty of the tall cranes. The brashness of the hooks and

chains. The constant hard whirring of the drones over our heads,
watching every last one of us.

