

THE JOHN WILKES
BOOTH/WARNER
BROTHERS/MGM/NBC
FUNERAL TRAIN



2003

I WAS JUST SETTLING DOWN for a long afternoon nap when Marty Felber burst into my office.

"My God!" he cried. "You've gotta come see!"

I lay back, easily. "See what?" I said.

Marty looked as if he might tear out his hair. "Haven't you heard? Down at the station, a special train is pulling in from Washington, DC. It's a steam engine, dammit, that boils water to drive the wheels. We haven't had a steam engine here for fifty years!"

"I've *seen* steam engines."

"No, no, this is strange. All black and covered with crepe."

"Covered with crepe? Let's get the hell out."

We got the hell out.

At the station we stared down the empty track. Far away we heard a melancholy wail, and above the horizon a cloud of steam rose to blow away in a sound of weeping.

The dark train glided from the twilight shadows in a drizzle of cold rain.

"Are there passengers?" I said.

"People crying. Hear?"

"My God, yes. Stand back."

The black train drifted like a dark cloud with the rain following and a ghostly steam clothing it.

The engine continued to exhale ghosts of smoke while it pulled a melancholy procession of cars, all burnt coal midnight black, with gardens of crepe papered along the roofs where the pale steam whispered and the weeping persisted from within the carriages.

On the side of one car was printed MGM.

On the second I read WARNER BROTHERS.

On the third and fourth, PARAMOUNT and RKO.

On the fifth, NBC.

A terrible cold filled my body. I stood, riven.

But finally, with Marty, I moved along the passing cars.

The black crepe rooftops stirred and the windows of each car seemed washed by rain.

The mournful cries from the engine sounded again and again as we moved swiftly, and the windows wept ceaselessly.

At last we arrived at the final, most melancholy car, where we stood staring through a great window dripping with rain.

Inside lay a long midnight coffin embedded in white flowers.

I stood as if struck by lightning, my heart gripped by a terrible fist. "Jesus!" I cried. "Nightmare! In my grandma's big picture book there was a train like this, but no names on the sides like MGM or Paramount." I stopped, for I could hardly breathe.

"Lord," I gasped. "In that window, the coffin. He's in there. Oh God, it's him!"

I shut my eyes.

"This is Abraham Lincoln's funeral train!"

From somewhere along the midnight train came another low cry. The black crepe fluttered.

Then a man came running and jolting down the platform, an old friend, Elmer Green, a studio press agent. He collided with me and yelled in my face.

"Hey, ain't this a catch? I'll give you the tour. Come on."

But I stood with my shoes sunk in concrete.

"What's wrong?" Green said.

"What's it look like?"

"You're not crying?" he said. "Cut that out. Let's go."

He backed off by the midnight cars, and Marty and I followed. I stumbled, my eyes blind with tears.

He stopped at last and said, "See that big red Pacific Elec-

tric trolley? Don't fit in with the rest of the train, right? Look. Middle window."

"Four guys in business suits, playing cards, smoking cigars. The plump guy, wait."

"Who?"

"Louis B. Mayer, the MGM studio mogul. Louie the Lion! Why's he here? He's dead."

"Not so you would notice. Okay. Back in 1930 Louis B. and his yes-men climbed on this big red trolley and pulled out of MGM Studios on its own track and trained to Glendale for surprise screenings. Then they piled back on this super Lionel electric train and roared home, shouting the good preview cards or letting them fly like confetti if they were bad."

"So?" I said, bleakly.

"So, when you've got trains like that and someone comes along with trains like this, you listen. Now climb aboard and meet Louis B., the reborn Christian Jewish Arab in this big trapped butterfly time machine."

I stared at my legs with half-blind eyes.

"Christ!" said Green. "Help me get him up."

Marty grabbed one elbow and Green the other and they yanked me up on the train.

We staggered through smoke-filled cars where scores of men riffled cards.

"God!" I exclaimed. "Is that Darryl Zanuck, 20th Century Fox's chief? And there, Harry Cohn, the beast of Gower Street? How in hell did they get lost in this nightmare?"

"Like I said, trapped in a time retrieval Butterfly Net. The biggest damned net in history scooped them out of the grave, with an offer they couldn't refuse: six feet of dirt, or a ticket on the John Wilkes Booth Forever Express."

"My God!"

"No, Elmo Wills," cried Green. "In an MGM Las Vegas basement, he jiggered some digital computers into conniption fits and nailed together a super-traveling catcher's mitt."

I stared along a smoke-filled gambling hall.

"Is that how you catch a train nowadays?"

"Yup," said Green.

"There are names of studios on each car," I said. "And inside, dead moguls, alive."

"They all invested in the virtual Net and Elmo, who said, 'What's the greatest locomotive in history? The train that brought Bobby Kennedy or Roosevelt home? What train toured the land, with everyone weeping, a century ago?'"

I felt the wetness on my cheek.

"A funeral train," I said, quietly. "Abe Lincoln's."

"Give the man a cigar."

The train jerked.

"Is it leaving?!" I cried. "I don't want to be seen on this abomination."

"Stay," said Green. "Name your salary."

I almost struck his smile.

"Damn you!"

"I already am." Green laughed. "But I'll recover."

The train jerked again with grinding sounds.

My friend Marty dashed ahead and came running back.

"You gotta see! The next car is jammed full of lawyers."

"Lawyers?" I turned to Green.

"They're suing," said Green. "Schedule problems. Which towns do we visit? Which broadcasts do we do? Which book contracts do we sign? Do we go with NBC or CNN? That sort."

"That sort!" I cried and plunged ahead, with Marty in full pursuit.

We ran through mobs of lunatics who were all yelling, pointing, and cursing.

At the fourth car I flung the door wide upon a midnight meadow of firefly light; all dancing sparks of blind machines.

Everywhere I saw cosmic banks of fire and spectral shapes of digital illumination.

This dim cave was lit by what seemed a rocket ship control panel; a man, not quite a dwarf, spidered his fingers quickly in patterns over the board. It was, indeed, the inventor of the incredible, blasphemous Butterfly Harvester.

I raised my hands in fists and the dwarf exclaimed, "You must hit me, yes?"

"Hit, no. Kill. What have you *done*?"

"Done?" cried the man. "I've mouth-to-mouth-breathed history. I might hurl my Net to trap Ben Hur's chariot or Cleopatra's barge and cry havoc and let loose the dogs of time."

He stared down and stroked his hands over the bright configurations, watching the lost years, talking half to himself.

"You know, I often thought if there'd been a fire at Ford's Theatre earlier that night in 1865, this funeral train would have been lost and the history of America changed forever."

"Say again?" I said.

"Fire," Elmo repeated. "At Ford's Theatre."

"Fire," I whispered, then thought: you never yell "fire" in a crowded theater. But what if you yell it on a crowded theater train?

Suddenly I was shrieking.

"Sons of bitches!"

I leaped to the back car door and flung it open wide.

"Bastards!"

Three dozen lawyers jumped at my steam-whistle shriek.

"Fire!" I screamed. "Ford's Theatre is on fire! Fire!" I shrieked.

And everyone on the damned and terrible train heard.

Old-fashioned doors were flung wide. Old-fashioned windows flew up, jam-packed with yells.

"Hold on!" cried Green.

"No!" I shouted. "Fire, fire!"

I ran, yelling, through car after car and spread the blaze.

"Fire!"

And panic suctioned all and everyone off the train.

The platform swarmed with victims and crazed lawyers, scribbling names and babbling.

"Fire," I whispered a final time, and the train was as empty as a dentist's office on a bad noon.

Green staggered up to me, and this time his feet looked sunk in concrete. His face was ashen and he seemed unable to breathe.

"Turn the train around," I said.

"What?"

Marty led me through a litter of unlit Cuban cigars and playing cards.

"Around," I wept. "Take the train back to Washington Station, 1865, April."

"We can't."

"You just *came* from there. Back, oh dear God, back."

"No return tickets. We can only go ahead."

"Ahead? Does MGM still have a track switch not covered up by asphalt? Pull in there, like in 1932, drop Louis B. Mayer, tell him Thalberg's alive on the fourth car back, Mayer will have a heart attack."

"Louie B.?"

"Harry Cohn too," I said.

"MGM's not his studio."

"He can call a cab or hitch a ride, but no one gets back on this stupid idiot bastard train."

"No one?"

"Unless they want to be buried in Ford's Theatre when I really strike a match and light the fire."

The lawyer mob on the platform surged and bleated.

"They're getting ready to sue," said Green.

"I'll sell them my life insurance. Reverse engine."

The train shook like a great iron dog.

"Too late, I gotta go."

"Oh God, yes. Look."

All the victims and lawyers were scrambling to pile on, and the stupid fool who had shouted "fire" was forgotten.

The train jerked with a great rumbling rattle.

"So long," whispered Green.

"Go," I said, wearily. "But who's next?"

"Next?"

"With your big damned awful Mortuary Warp. Who gets caught, gassed, and pinned?"

Green pulled out a crumpled paper.

"Some guy named Lafayette."

"Some guy? You dumb, stupid sap! Don't you know Lafayette saved our Revolution, age twenty-one, brought us guns, ships, uniforms, men!?"

"It doesn't say that here." Green stared at his notes.

"Lafayette was Washington's adopted son. Went home and named his firstborn George Washington Lafayette."

"They left that out," said Green.

"Came back, age seventy, paraded eighty cities where people named streets, parks, and towns for him. Lafayette, Lafayette, Lafayette."

"Hey!" Green poked the note. "Yeah, Lafayette's *second* farewell tour."

The train gave an assassin's cry, the wheels ground their teeth.

"See you in Springfield." Green jumped up onto the back platform. "Next April."

"Who's that with you?" I shouted.

Green turned and yelled.

"Booth," he cried. "John Wilkes Booth. He lectures from this observation car up ahead."

"Poor son of a bitch," I whispered.

Green read my lips and repeated, "Poor S.O.B."

And the train moved on.