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“IN THOSE DAYS-back during the war, I mean-the train still stopped in Orrington, and Bill Baterman had a funeral hack there at the loading depot to meet the freight carrying the body of his son Timmy. The coffin was unloaded by four railroad men. I was one of them. There was an army fellow on board from Graves and Registration-that was the army’s wartime version of undertakers, Louis-but he never got off the train. He was sitting drunk in a boxcar that still had twelve coffins in it.“We put Timmy into the back of a Cadillac-in those days it still wasn’t uncommon to hear such things called ‘hurry-up wagons’ because the old days, the major concern was to get them into the ground before they rotted. Bill Baterman stood his face stony and kinda…I dunno…kinda dry, guess you’d say. He wept no tears. Huey Garber was driving the train that day, and he said that army fella had really had a tour for himself. Huey said they’d flown in a whole shitload of those coffins to Limestone in Presque Isle, at which point both the coffins and their keeper entrained for points south.

“The army fella comes walking up to Huey, and he takes a fifth of rye whiskey out of his uniform blouse, and he says in this soft, drawly Dixie voice, ‘Well, Mr. Engineer, you’re driving a mystery train today, did know that?’

“Huey shakes his head.

” ‘Well, you are. At least, that’s what they call funeral train down in Alabama.’ Huey says the fella took a list out of his pocket and squinted at it. ‘We’re going to start by dropping two of those coffins off in Houlton, and then I’ve got one for Passadumkeag, two for Bangor, one for Derry, one for Ludlow, and so on. I feel like a fugging milkman. You want a drink?’

“Well, Huey declines the drink on the grounds the Bangor and Aroostook is pretty fussy on the subject of train drivers with rye on their breaths, and the fella from Graves and Registration don’t hold it against Huey, any more than Huey holds the fact of the army fella’s drunkenness against him. They even shook on her, Huey said.

“So off they go, dropping those flag-covered coffins every other stop or two. Eighteen or twenty of’em in all. Huey said it went on all the way to Boston, and there was weeping and wailing relatives at every stop except Ludlow…and at Ludlow he was treated to the sight of Bill Baterman, who, he said, looked like he was dead inside and just waiting for his soul to stink. When he got off that train, he said he woke up that army fella, and they hit some spots-fifteen or twenty-and Huey got drunker than he had ever been and went to a whore, which he’d never done in his whole life, and woke up with a set of crabs so big and mean they gave him the shivers, and he said that if this was what they called a mystery train, he never wanted to drive no mystery train again.

“Timmy’s body was taken up to the Greenspan Home on Fern Street-it used to be across from where the New Franklin Laundry stands now-and two days later he was buried in Pleasantview Cemetery with full military honors.

“Well, I tell you, Louis: Missus Baterman was dead ten years then, along with the second child she tried to bring into the world, and that had a lot to do with happened. A second child might have helped to ease the pain, don’t you think? A second child might have reminded old Bill that there’s others that feel the pain and have to be helped through. I guess in that way, you’re luckier-having another child and all, I mean. A child and a wife who are both alive and well.

“According to the letter Bill got from the lieutenant in charge of his boy’s platoon, Timmy was shot down on the road to Rome on July 15,1943. His body was shipped home two days later, and it got to Limestone on the nineteenth. It was put aboard Huey Garber’s mystery train the very next day. Most of the GIs who got killed in Europe were buried in Europe, but all of the boys who went home on that train were special-Timmy had died charging a machine-gun nest, and he had won the Silver Star posthumously.

“Timmy was buried-don’t hold me to this, but I think it was on July 22. It was four or five days later that Marjorie Washburn, who was the mailwoman in those days, saw Timmy walking up the road toward

York's Livery Stable. Well, Margie damn near drove right off the road, and you can understand why. She went back to the post office, tossed her leather bag with all her undelivered mail still in it on George Anderson's desk, and told him she was going home and to bed right then.

" 'Margie, are you sick?' George asks. 'You are just as white as a gull's wing.'

" 'I've had the fright of my life, and I don't want to talk to you about it,' Margie Washburn says. 'I ain't going to talk to Brian about it, or my mom, or anybody. When I get up to heaven, if Jesus asks me to talk to Him about it, maybe I will. But I don't believe it.' And out she goes.

"Everybody knew Timmy was dead; there was his obituary in the Bangor Daily News and the Ellsworth American just the week before, picture and all, and half the town turned out for his funeral up to the city. And here Margie seen him, walking up the road-lurching up the road, she finally told old George Anderson-only this was twenty years later, and she was dying, and George told me it seemed to him like she wanted to tell somebody what shed seen. George said it seemed to him like it preyed on her mind, you know.

"Pale he was, she said, and dressed in an old pair of chino pants and a faded flannel hunting shirt, although it must have been ninety degrees in the shade that day. Margie said all his hair was sticking up in the back. 'His eyes were like raisins stuck in bread dough. I saw a ghost that day, George. That's what scared me so. I never thought I'd see such a thing, but there it was.'

"Well, word got around. Pretty soon some other people saw Timmy, too. Missus Stratton-well, we called her 'missus,' but so far as anyone knew she could have been single or divorced or grass-widowed; she had a little two-room house down where the Pedersen Road joins the Hancock Road, and she had a lot of jazz records, and sometimes she'd be wilting to throw you a little party if you had a ten-dollar bill that wasn't working too hard. Well, she saw him from her

porch, and she said he walked right up to the edge of the road and stopped there.

“He just stood there, she said, his hands dangling at his sides and his head pushed forward, lookin’ like a boxer who’s ready to eat him some canvas. She said she stood there on her porch, heart goin’ like sixty, too scared to move. Then she said he turned around, and it was like watching a drunk man try to do an about-face. One leg went way out and the other foot turned, and he just about fell over. She said he looked right at her and all the strength just run out of her hands and she dropped the basket of washing she had, and the clothes fell out and got smutty all over again.

“She said his eyes…she said they looked as dead and dusty as marbles, Louis. But he saw her…and he grinned…and she said he talked to her. Asked her if she still had those records because he wouldn’t mind cutting a rug with her. Maybe that very night. And Missus Stratton went back inside, and she wouldn’t come out for most of a week, and by then it was over anyway.

“Lot of people saw Timmy Baterman. Many of them are dead now-Missus Stratton is, for one, and others have moved on, but there are a few old crocks like me left around who’ll tell you…if you ask em right.

“We saw him, I tell you, walking back and forth along the Pedersen Road, a mile east of his daddy’s house and a mile west. Back and forth he went, back and forth all day, and for all anyone knew, all night. Shirt untucked, pale face, hair all stuck up in spikes, fly unzipped sometimes, and this look on his face… this look…”

Jud paused to light a cigarette, then shook the match out, and looked at Louis through the haze of drifting blue smoke. And although the story was, of course, utterly mad, there was no lie in Jud’s eyes.

“You know, they have these stories and these movies-I don’t know if they’re true-about zombies down in Haiti. In the movies they just sort

of shamble along, with their dead eyes starin' straight ahead, real slow and sort of clumsy. Timmy Baterman was like that, Louis, like a zombie in a movie, but he wasn't. There was something more. There was something goin' on behind his eyes, and sometimes you could see it and sometimes you couldn't see it. Somethin' behind his eyes, Louis. I don't think that thinking is what I want to call it. I don't know what in the hell I want to call it.

"It was sly, that was one thing. Like him telling Missus Stratton he wanted to cut a rug with her. There was something goin' on in there, Louis, but I don't think it was thinking and I don't think it had much-maybe nothing at all-to do with Timmy Baterman. It was more like a…radio signal that was comin' from somewhere else. You looked at him and you thought, 'If he touches me, I'm gonna scream.' Like that.

"Back and forth he went, up and down the road, and one day after I got home from work-this must have been, oh, I'm going to say it was July 30 or so-here is George Anderson, the postmaster, don't you know, sitting on my back porch, drinking iced tea with Hannibal Benson, who was then our second selectman, and Alan Purinton, who was fire chief. Norma sat there too, but never said a thing.

"George kept rubbing the stump at the top of his right leg. Lost most of that leg working on the railroad, he did, and the stump used to bother him something fierce on those hot and muggy days. But here he was, misery or not.

" 'This has gone far enough,' George says to me. 'I got a mailwoman who won't deliver out on the Pedersen Road-that's one thing. It's starting to raise Cain with the government, and that's something else.'

" 'What do you mean, it's raising Cain with the government?' I asked.

"Hannibal said he'd had a call from the War Department. Some lieutenant named Kinsman whose job it was to sort out malicious mischief from plain old tomfoolery. 'Four or five people have written

anonymous letters to the War Department,' Hannibal says, 'and this Lieutenant Kinsman is starting to get a little bit concerned. If it was just one fellow who had written one letter, they'd laugh it off. If it was just one fellow writing a whole bunch of letters, Kinsman says he'd call the state police up in Derry Barracks and tell 'em they might have a psychopath with a hate on against the Baterman family in Ludlow. But these letters all came from different people. He said you could tell that by the handwriting, name or no name, and they all say the same crazy thing-that if Timothy Baterman is dead, he makes one hell of a lively corpse walking up and down Pederson Road with his bare face hanging out.

" 'This Kinsman is going to send a fellow out or come himself if this don't settle down,' Hannibal finishes up. 'They want to know if Timmy's dead, or AWOL, or what because they don't like to think their records are all at sixes and sevens. Also they're gonna want to know who was buried in Timmy Baterman's box, if he wasn't.'

"Well, you can see what kind of a mess it was, Louis. We sat there most of an hour, drinking iced tea and talking it over. Norma asked us if we wanted sandwiches, but no one did.

"We talked it around and talked it around, and finally we decided we had to go out there to the Baterman place. I'll never forget that night, not if I live to be twice as old's I am now. It was hot, hotter than the hinges of hell, with the sun going down like a bucket of guts behind the clouds. There was none of us wanted to go, but we had to. Norma knew it before any of us. She got me inside on some pretext or other and said, 'Don't you let them dither around and put this off, Judson. You got to get this taken care of. It's an abomination.'"

Jud measured Louis evenly with his eyes.

"That was what she called it, Louis. It was her word. Abomination. And she kind of whispers in my ear, 'If anything happens, Jud, you just run. Never mind these others; they'll have to look out for themselves. You remember me and bust your hump right out of there if anything happens.'

“We drove over in Hannibal Benson’s car-that son of a bitch got all the A-coupons he wanted, I don’t know how. Nobody said much, but all four of us was smoking like chimblies. We was scared, Louis, just as scared as we could be. But the only one who really said anything was Alan Purinton. He says to George, ‘Bill Baterman has been up to dickens in that woods north of Route 15, and I’ll put my warrant to that.’ Nobody answered, but I remember George noddin’ his head.

“Well, we got there, and Alan knocked, but nobody answered, so we went around to the back and there the two of them were. Bill Baterman was sitting there on his back stoop with a pitcher of beer, and Timmy was at the back of the yard, just staring up at that red, bloody sun as it went down. His whole face was orange with it, like he’d been flayed alive. And Bill…he looked like the devil had gotten him after his seven years of highfalutin. He was floatin’ in his clothes, and I judged he’d lost forty pounds. His eyes had gone back in their sockets until they were like little animals in a pair of caves… and his mouth kept goin tick-tick-tick on the left side.”

Jud paused, seemed to consider, and then nodded imperceptibly. “Louis, he looked damned.

“Timmy looked around at us and grinned. Just seeing him grin made you want to scream. Then he turned and went back to looking at the sun go down. Bill says, ‘I didn’t hear you boys knock,’ which was a bald-faced lie, of course, since Alan laid on that door loud enough to wake the…to wake up a deaf man.

“No one seemed like they was going to say anything, so I says, ‘Bill, I heard your boy was killed over in Italy’

‘“That was a mistake,’ he says, looking right at me.

” ‘Was it?’ I says.

” ‘You see him standin right there, don’t you?’ he says.

” ‘So who do you reckon was in that coffin you had out at Pleasantview?’ Alan Purinton asks him.

” ‘Be damned if I know,’ Bill says, and be damned if I care.’ He goes to get a cigarette and spills them all over the back porch, then breaks two or three trying to pick them up.

” ‘Probably have to be an exhumation,’ Hannibal says. ‘You know that, don’t you? I had a call from the goddam War Department, Bill. They are going to want to know if they buried some other mother’s son under Timmy’s name.’

” ‘Well, what in the hell of it?’ Bill says in a loud voice. ‘That’s nothing to me, is it? I got my boy. Timmy come home the other day. He’s been shell-shocked or something. He’s a little strange now, but he’ll come around.’

” ‘Let’s quit this, Bill,’ I says, and all at once I was pretty mad at him. ‘If and when they dig up that army coffin, they’re gonna find it dead empty, unless you went to the trouble of filling it up with rocks after you took your boy out of it, and I don’t think you did. I know what happened, Hannibal and George and Alan here know what happened, and you know what happened too. You been foolin’ around up in the woods, Bill, and you have caused yourself and this town a lot of trouble.’

” ‘You fellas know your way out, I guess,’ he says. ‘I don’t have to explain myself to you, or justify myself to you, or nothing. When I got that telegram, the life ran right out of me. I felt her go, just like piss down the inside of my leg. Well, I got my boy back. They had no right to take my boy. He was only seventeen. He was all I had left of his dear mother, and it was ill-fuckin’- legal. So fuck the army, and fuck the War Department, and fuck the United States of America, and fuck you boys too. I got him back. He’ll come around. And that’s all I got to say. Now you all just march your boots back where you came from.’

“And his mouth is tick-tick-tickin’, and there’s sweat, all over his forehead in big drops, and that was when I saw he was crazy. It would have driven me crazy too. Living with that…that thing.”

Louis was feeling sick to his stomach. He had drunk too much beer too fast. Pretty soon it was all going to come up on him. The heavy, loaded feeling in his stomach told him it would be coming up soon.

“Well, there wasn’t much else we could do. We got ready to go. Hannibal says, ‘Bill, God help you.’

“Bill says, ‘God never helped me. I helped myself’

“That was when Timmy walked over to us. He even walked wrong, Louis. He walked like an old, old man. He’d put one foot high up and then bring it down and, then kind of shuffle and then lift the other one. It was like watchin’ a crab walk. His hands dangled down by his legs. And when he got close enough, you could see red marks across his face on the slant, like pimples or little burns. I reckon that’s where the Kraut machine gun got him. Must have damn near blowed his head off.

“And he stank of the grave. It was a black smell, like everything inside him was just lying there, spoiled. I saw Alan Purinton put a hand up to cover his nose and mouth. The stench was just awful. You almost expected to see grave maggots squirming around in his hair-”

“Stop,” Louis said hoarsely. “I’ve heard enough.”

“You ain’t,” Jud said. He spoke with haggard earnestness. “That’s it, you ain’t. And I can’t even make it as bad as it was. Nobody could understand how bad it was unless they was there. He was dead, Louis. But he was alive too. And he…he…he knew things.”

“Knew things?” Louis sat forward.

“Ayuh. He looked at Alan for a long time, kind of grinning-you could see his teeth, anyway-and then he spoke in this low voice; you felt like you had to strain forward to hear it. It sounded like he had gravel down in his tubes. ‘Your wife is fucking that man she works with down at the drugstore, Purinton. What do you think of that? She screams when she comes. What do you think of that?’

“Alan, he kind of gasped, and you could see it had hit him. Alan’s in a nursing home up in Gardener now, or was the last I heard-he must be pushing ninety. Back when all this happened, he was forty or so, and there had been some talk around about his second wife. She was his second cousin, and she had come to live with Alan and Alan’s first wife, Lucy, just before the war. Well, Lucy died, and a year and a half later Alan up and married this girl. Laurine, her name was. She was no more than twenty-four when they married. And there had been some talk about her, you know, if you were a man, you might have called her ways sort of free and easy and let it go at that. But the women thought she might be loose. And maybe Alan had had a few thoughts in that direction too because he says, ‘Shut up! Shut up or I’ll knock you down, whatever you are!’

” ‘Shush now,Timmy,’ Bill says, and he looks worse than ever, you know, like maybe he’s going to puke or faint dead away, or do both. ‘You shush, Timmy’

“But Timmy didn’t take no notice. He looks around at George Anderson and he says, ‘That grandson you set such a store by is just waiting for you to die, old man. The money is all he wants, the money he thinks you got socked away in your lockbox at the Bangor Eastern Bank. That’s why he makes up to you, but behind your back he makes fun of you, him and his sister. Old wooden-leg, that’s what they call you,’ Timmy says, and Louis, his voice-it changed. It got mean. It sounded like the way that grandson of George’s would have sounded if…you know, if the things Timmy was saying was true.

” ‘Old wooden-leg,’ Timmy says, ‘and won’t they shit when they find out you’re poor as a church mouse because you lost it all in 1938? Won’t they shit, George? Won’t they just shit?’

“George, he backed away then, and his wooden leg buckled under him, and he fell back on Bill’s porch and upsat his pitcher of beer, and he was as white as your undershirt, Louis.

“Bill, he gets him back on his feet somehow, and he’s roarin’ at his boy, ‘Timmy, you stop it! You stop it!’ But Timmy wouldn’t. He said somethin’ bad about Hannibal, and then he said something bad about me too, and by then he was…ravin’, I’d say. Yeah, he was ravin’, all right. Screamin’. And we started to back away, and then we started to run, draggin’ George along the best we could by the arms because he’d gotten the straps and harnesses on the fake leg twisted somehow, and it was all off to one side with the shoe turned around backward and draggin’ on the grass.

“The last I seen of Timmy Baterman, he was on the back lawn by the clothesline, his face all red in the settin’ sun, those marks standin’ out on his face, his hair all crazy and dusty somehow…and he was laughin’ and screechin’ over and over again ‘Old wooden-leg! Old wooden leg! And the cuckold! And the whoremaster! Goodbye, gentlemen! Goodbye! Goodbye!’ and then he laughed, but it was screaming, really…something inside him…screaming… and screaming…and screaming.”

Jud stopped. His chest moved up and down rapidly.

“Jud,” Louis said. “The thing this Timmy Baterman told you…was it true?”

“It was true,” Jud muttered. “Christ! It was true. I used go to a whorehouse in Bangor betimes. Nothing many a man hasn’t done, although I s’pose there are plenty that walk the straight and narrow. I just would get the urge-the compulsion, maybe-to sink it into strange flesh now and then. Or pay some woman to do the things a man can’t bring himself to ask his wife to do. Men keep their gardens too, Louis. It wasn’t a terrible thing, what I done, and all of that has been behind me for the last eight or nine years, and Norma would not have left me if she had known.

“But something in her would have died forever. Something dear and sweet.”

Jud’s eyes were red and swollen and bleary. The tears of the old are singularly unlovely, Louis thought. But when Jud groped across the table for Louis’s hand, Louis took it firmly.

“He told us only the bad,” he said after a moment. “Only the bad. God knows there is enough of that in any human being’s life, isn’t there? Two or three days later, Laurine Purinton left Ludlow for good, and folks in town who saw her before she got on the train said she was sprouting two shiners and had cotton stuffed up both bores of her pump. Alan, he would never talk about it. George died in 1950, and if he left anything to that grandson and granddaughter of his, I never heard about it. Hannibal got kicked out of office because of something that was just like what Timmy Baterman accused him of. I won’t tell you exactly what it was-you don’t need to know-but misappropriation of town funds for his own use conies close enough to cover it, I reckon. There was even talk of trying him on embezzlement charges, but it never came to much. Losing the post was enough punishment for him anyway; his whole life was playing the big cheese.

“But there was good in those men too. That’s what I mean; that’s what folks always find it so hard to remember. It was Hannibal got the fund started for the Eastern General Hospital, right before the war. Alan Puritan was one of the most generous, open-handed men I ever knew. And old George Anderson only wanted to go on running the post office forever.

“It was only the bad it wanted to talk about though. It was only the bad it wanted us to remember because it was bad…and because it knew we meant danger for it. The Timmy Baterman that went off to fight the war was a nice, ordinary kid, Louis, maybe a little dull but goodhearted. The thing we saw that night, lookin’ up into that red sun…that was a monster. Maybe it was a zombie or a dybbuk or a demon. Maybe there’s no name for such a thing as that, but the Micmacs would have known what it was, name or no.”

“What?” Louis said numbly.

“Something that had been touched by the Wendigo,” Jud said evenly. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, let it out, and looked at his watch.

“Welladay The hour’s late, Louis. I’ve talked nine times as much as I meant to.”

“I doubt that,” Louis said. “You’ve been very eloquent. Tell me how it came out.”

“There was a fire at the Baterman place two nights later,” Jud said. “The house burned flat. Alan Purinton said there was no doubt about the fire being set. Range oil had been splashed from one end of that little house to the other. You could smell the reek of it for three days after the fire was out.”

“So they both burned up.”

“Oh, ayuh, they burned. But they was dead beforehand. Timmy was shot twice in the chest with a pistol Bill Baterman kept handy, an old Colt’s. They found it in Bill’s hand. What he’d done, or so it looked like, was to kill his boy, lay him on the bed, and then spill out that range oil. Then he sat down on his easy chair by the radio, flicked a match, and ate the barrel of that Colt.45.”

“Jesus,” Louis said.

“They were pretty well charred, but the county medical examiner said it looked to him like Timmy Baterman had been dead two or three weeks.”