

The Woods of the Sleepy Hollow

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Marcos returned an unfriendly stare at the housekeeping guy, “You waiting for something?”

The housekeeping guy raised his head, stole a glance at Marcos and replied, “No sir.”

“In that case, thank you my friend and good bye.” With a bang, Marcos closed the door on his face.

"Good day, sir!" Said the Indian housekeepng guy. Hardly twenty seven. By then the door had closed on his face. His words of thanks remained unheard by Marcos.

He was expecting some tips, was he? Bloody loser. Thought Marcos. Why the hell? Does the hotel pay him peanuts, that this bloody loser was waiting to be tipped to bring his luggage upstairs? Marcos was disgusted.

He pulled the curtains apart. It had started snowing outside. The first snow of this winter.

Marcos will have to halt in this Buffalo, New York hotel for a day before heading towards Mexico. His country. His home. It isn't possible for him to take a flight to Mexico. That's dangerous and suicidal. He has to travel by road and sea.

Marcos struggled in vain for over five minutes, trying to open his old fashioned steel trunk. He tried several of the tiny keys. But opening it seemed impossible. He was quite sure he had lost the key to the trunk.

Asking for help from the hotel would mean an additional expense of at least a hundred dollars. Why not call that Indian housekeeping guy and request him for a personal favor? That'll be a lot cheaper.

Marcos called the room service guy.

The boy surely knew some magic. With a twisted hairpin he pried open the lock in two minutes. Magic is probably infectious, because Marcos' mood also improved like magic.

"Wow, that's magic, man! You know some mumbo jumbo, huh? Asian?"

"Yes sir. Indian"

"What's your name, son?"

"Sam."

His real name was Sambaran Bandyopadhyay though; a traditional Indian name, somewhat uncommon, uncomfortably long and difficult to pronounce, especially in this country; named by his grandfather twenty seven years ago. He had himself shortened his name to Sam after coming to United States for a career.

Marcos fished out two ten dollar bills from his wallet, thought for a couple of seconds, put back one into his wallet, and handed the other to Sam, thanking him.

Sam, the housekeeping guy stared at the large wooden statue of a horse with curiosity as it popped out from the trunk. *Curiosity kills the cat*, thought Marcos.

“Curios. It’s my business” he smiled at Sam. “I collect rare and ancient objects of art. Buying and selling curios is what I do for a living, son.”

For his business Marcos has to travel a lot. Century old objects of interest, ancient furnishings, paintings, and statues get sold at illogically high prices. The shady part is that among these there are some stolen items too. Some have been missing from some museum for the last few years. They get sold in Mexico through Marcos. This calls for secrecy. He cannot carry these items along normal routes. That is why he had to resort to either road or waterways that are comparatively safer. He could not possibly tell all that to this young Indian housekeeping guy. The guy left the room still looking astounded.

In the evening it started snowing heavily. The mercury was falling and that could be felt even in this temperature controlled hotel room. Through the window panes he could see the horizon getting foggy and darker. Rows of high-rise building blocks were getting covered under a film of white snowflakes. Down below, on the snaking road which was turning white from grey, rows of cars passed incessantly. The lights in the room were flickering. The voltage was fluctuating. This irritated Marcos. He picked up the phone and abruptly called room service.

At last he found some time to admire his wooden horse. In the afternoon he had fallen asleep without changing his clothes. He had been dead tired of travelling from one coast to another. He took a hot shower; before planning to go down to the restaurant below. But then the lights started flickering again.

This horse would be at least a hundred and fifty years old; the handiwork of some unknown Dutch sculptor. The horse belonged to that period, when Dutch nomads left Holland to settle down in America permanently. The old Dutch gentleman from whom he had bought this piece had said so. Black Stallion. An unusually beautiful work of art and craftsmanship. Every muscle on the horse’s body looked surprisingly real and came alive. Marcos hoped to make at least a few thousand dollars by selling it.

The door-bell rang. Room service.

“Good evening sir. May I help you?” The Indian guy was at the door.

“Come on in. Look at my lights. Something’s wrong with them. They’re flickering like hell. Now, when I pay for a hotel room, I do not expect...”

“That’ll be okay sir. It has been happening in all the rooms. Our electrical engineers are working on the line.”

“Won’t take long, I suppose, because it is getting on my nerves.”

“No sir, just a little longer. ... The statue... is it very old sir?”

“Oh that? Yeah, about a hundred and fifty years.”

“No sir. It is older than that. Two hundred and seven years,” replied Sam.

“You mean... you know the exact age of this wooden horse?” Marcos’s hands paused while lighting his cigarette.

“Yes sir, I know more than that. When I saw it for the first time this afternoon, I recognized it. I had seen its picture on a website. This very same sculpture. I had read about it too.”

“Yeah? Which website? Have you seen its photograph?”

“No sir, just a hand drawn sketch. The site was probably called something like, ‘*truehalloween.com*’”

“True Halloween? You mean there is something mysterious and spooky about it? Marcos’s hand, the one with the cigarette trembled a little. The light in the room became very dim at that instant.

They stared at each other silently, without batting an eyelid. Then Sam started.

“There is a small village some forty miles from here. Beside the Hudson River. It’s called Sleepy Hollow.”

“Wait, I’ve heard this name”, said Marcos.

“There’s a movie by this name sir. That’s why you know the name. The village is surrounded by a forest. The forest is known as the *woods of the Sleepy Hollow*. The place is so quiet that you’d think the entire village is sleeping. In this quiet village, in 1799 some strange incidents started happening. Occasionally, headless bodies were found lying on the village road.”

“Headless bodies?”

Marcos, listening intently, startled as the cigarette burned down and scorched his middle finger. He had forgotten to smoke. Marcos took out another cigarette from the box and offered Sam.

“Thank you.”

“Coffee? Let me order some coffee?” Marcos picked up the phone and ordered for two coffees.

“Thank you sir. So, in the evenings people steered clear off the road leading to the woods. Not only so... soon they stopped coming out onto the village road after sunset. Those who had the courage to peep through their windows said that they saw an armored knight holding a sword in his hand, riding on a horseback, galloping along the village road during twilight. The fate of whoever crossed his path was doomed. The rider would chop off the head and take it away with him. They also noticed with awe, that the rider himself had no head! A headless mounted knight.

“Police officer Ichabod Crane came from the city to investigate. His investigations revealed that a Hessian soldier had been killed near Sleepy Hollow twenty years earlier, in 1779. The enemies had beheaded him and took his head as a booty. Since then he often visited the terrain in search of his lost head. His horse was always with him. The name of his horse was Daredevil.”

The doorbell rang with a jarring ugly sound that startled Marcos. Coffee had arrived. Snowflakes were gathering outside the window pane. A strong wind rattled the window.

“Interesting story” said Marcos Gabriel Lenovez, sipping his coffee.

“Officer Ichabod took the help of Katerina, a local tomboyish girl and together they found the huge tree from under which the headless soldier came out each evening. After

galloping through the village on his horse with an open sword he would return to the tree and finally jump into its trunk.

“At last one day he found his head. It was with Katerina’s stepmother, known in the village as a witch. The soldier killed Katrna’s stepmother and got back his head. There ends the story of the headless phantom of Sleepy Hollow. Author Washington Irving, who had his roots in that village, later published a novel, ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ which was later made into a movie.”

“Spooky story, but what is the relation of my horse with this story?”

“The story in the novel ended here, but many incidents happened after that are not documented in the novel and the film, about which most people do not know.” Sam said. The lights in the room went off, and pitch black darkness rushed in through the windows.

“Oh, f***!” Marcos grumbled.

“Our engineers are working on it, sir. It’ll be okay.”

“Awww. Hmmm. So... what happened after that?”

“Right. After that, that ominous-looking tree was cut down by the villagers. The felled tree was profusely bleeding blood. Within a month, Peter Van Garret, the woodcutter who had cut the tree, died mysteriously. You know how he died? Thunderstruck! His entire head smashed and vanished after a lightning struck his head. An atheist artist, Baltas Van Tassel, who lived in the village took the tree trunk home in a carriage and carved this horse out of the wood. He gifted the horse to the police officer Ichabod and his newly-married wife Katerina. On his way home from the police officer’s house, Baltas was attacked by a band of robbers who chopped off his head. It was in the year 1799.

Another horrific and terribly sad incident happened the same year during Christmas. There was a bank-robbery in Tarry Town near Sleepy Hollow. The thirty year old brave police officer Ichabod fought a gun battle with the bank robbers and died in the gun battle. His skull was shattered by a bullet, like a water melon.”

The wind was growing stronger outside, because the windows rattled rather noisily. The sky was dark. The dots of light were blotted through the thick fog outside. The chilling

wind was probably entering through some leak in the window, because Marcos shuddered.

“After this incident, Katerina didn’t want to keep the wooden horse with her. The old and wise elderly folk of Sleepy Hollow advised her to get rid of the statue. They told her to throw it into the marshland inside the jungle. Katerina went into the forest with the statue. But since that fateful day, nobody had ever seen either Katerina or the statue.”

Both men sat quietly for some time.

“Strange story,” said Marcos after a long silence.

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Marcos woke up at midnight with a shudder. The TV was on. He fell off to sleep while watching TV. He checked his wristwatch. It was past midnight. The TV was on mute and the changing images changed the color of the room every second. He had been sleeping on the sofa.

What was that? Why was he seeing the shadow of a horse on the wall? His skin gave goosebumps. Was it because of the chilling weather? He turned around to see the statue of the horse standing on the table and realized his folly. The shadow was of the statue, caused by the light from the TV. He tried not to think about the horse. But strange thoughts haunted him again and again.

Is the statue still haunted? He thought. The snowstorm had stopped. You don’t see a snowstorm in New York every day.

What was that sound?

A nagging sound of water dripping from a faucet came from the washroom. Had he forgotten to close the tap properly? He went to the washroom and hesitated to enter. Is anyone there? He thought.

Stealthily he entered the toilet and switched on the light. Nobody was there. But somehow there was a feeling that someone was present in the hotel room. To shake off the uneasiness, there is nothing like a fag, he thought and took out a cigarette. He put it between his lips and went to light it. The next moment he threw the cigarette lighter away with a jerk. What was that?

"Jesus!" he muttered. The cigarette fell from his lips.

This cigarette lighter was one of his favorite curio collections that he had kept with himself for three years. It was a little mermaid made of metal and glass.

The mermaid's head was broken.

Marcos's heart was galloping. He was perspiring even in this chilling New York winter. Did the mermaid fall from the sofa? Or has anyone broken it?

Marcos walked up to the horse. It is made of wood from Sleepy Hollow. From the tree in which the headless horseman took shelter. Marcos, now definitely felt that he was not alone in the room. He didn't know why, but he felt it for sure.

After this Marcos saw something that made the color of his face fly. His throat dried up, something fluttered inside his stomach and a cold wave rolled down his spine. On the side of the wooden horse there was distinctly a stain of fresh flowing blood.

Marcos lost consciousness. His six-foot figure collapsed on the rug, with a thud.

#

It was 5PM, the next day. Darkness will set in any time now. Marcos was sitting inside his car, parked in a deep jungle. The headlight was on. A thick winter fog was rising from the ground making the forest look even more eerie. He was now forty miles away from Buffalo, deep inside the woods of Sleepy Hollow.

Where was Sam?

In the morning he had discussed the paranormal happenings of last night with Sam and both agreed that it would be wise to throw the statue back into the bog inside the heart of the jungle.

What was that sound? The cry of an owl. An owl flew past. The cry gave Marcos goosebumps. It was much colder in the woods, than it was in New York, though the two places are no more than forty miles apart. Marcos raised the glass of the window.

Someone was approaching through the fog. Marcos sat up straight on his seat, in alert attention.

Sam.

“Hello, Mr. Marcos”

Marcos opened the door.

“I thought you weren’t coming. Get in”. He started the engine.

It had become darker and the fog denser. The car was moving slowly through the woods, breaking twigs and branches under its wheels. Both men were quiet.

“Wait. Turn left. The bog is on that side.” Sam said.

The car turned. But after driving a few meters, Marcos had to apply brakes. What was that, shining on the ground in front of the car? Unless it was moved the car couldn’t go. Sam got down and walked up to the object. He almost disappeared in the fog.

“What’s it?” Marcos shouted from inside the car. There was no reply. Marcos pressed on the horn again and again impatiently.

“Come out and see.”

Marcos trudged ahead. He could feel his legs weakening.

“A sword!” Sam pointed towards it. A shiny large sword was vertically stuck into the soft ground, as if it fell from the sky.

Marcos’s heart missed a beat. He pulled Sam’s hand sharply and dragged him towards the car.

“Let’s get out of here.” he shouted.

“No. The marshland is right in front. Open the boot of the car.”

They opened the boot and took out the large statue of the horse. Together they carried it to the dark waters ahead. After dumping the haunted figure into the shallow waters of the marsh, they ran back towards the car. After getting in, Marcos drove it swiftly in reverse gear. The red rear lights of the car made the foggy trees of the woods look ghostly. The hanging branches of trees waving in the wind seemed to beckon them with their hands.

“Faster... move faster...” Sam said, looking behind him.

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Marcos was returning to Mexico on a Virgin flight. The statue wasn't there anymore. So, there was no reason not to take a flight. He relaxed with eyes closed and listened to his favorite numbers on his iPhone. There's nothing like music to soothe the nerves. The stress of the last two days was still throbbing inside him. It may never completely abandon him.

He needed a pillow. Where was the flight stewardess? He got up startled. He walked along the aisle. Strange! Such a massive aircraft, and there was not a single passenger! All the seats were empty. But when it left New York, it was packed. The cockpit door was open. He went in. But what is this? The plot didn't have a head! He was beheaded! The beheaded plot turned towards him.

He woke up gasping for breath. A flight stewardess was offering him a pillow. He was in his seat, sleeping. What a dream! How gruesome.

At the same time a car stopped inside the cold and foggy woods of Sleepy Hollow. The door opened and Sam got off. Sam... Sambaran Bandyopadhyay. He removed the sticking plaster from his finger. The cut had almost healed.

He walked ahead and picked up the sword. It had to be returned to Harry. Harry lent out these things on hire to movie makers. Sam too, had taken it on rent. He went into the cold soggy mud and found the hundred and fifty year old wooden horse easily.

Though the story of the mysterious tree of Sleepy Hollow and the website 'truehalloween.com' were all made up instantly by him, Sam was sure that the antique horse would fetch at least five thousand dollars.

Actually... that Mexican was mean. Had he offered some reasonable tip to Sam, would he have bothered to play this game with him! Sam needed to get even and teach him a lesson.

To make him believe in his yarn, he had done just two things. The moment the light in the room went off, he broke the head of the cigarette lighter mermaid. And then he cut his

own finger a little with the nail-cutter and smeared the blood on the back of the horse standing in the dark.

The rest just happened inside the mind of the Mexican, after hearing the instantly cooked up tale of Sleepy Hollow.

Sam whistled as he opened the boot of the car, and placed the horse and the sword carefully inside. His car moved through the snowy and foggy jungles of Sleepy Hollow. His destination, New York.