

Sleepy Hollow

By Jeff S Smith

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*It was an age most of us could scarcely imagine,
Before digital media bombarded our senses,
Before the hum of automobiles and the trains before them,
Before televisions and radios put soothing voices in our homes,
Before night was banished by perpetual artificial light.
It was a time of injustice, despair, and blind faith,
When dead silence could drive men mad by
amplifying small rattles and creaks,
And nightfall meant utter darkness and a netherworld
that conjured visions of phenomena we can no longer see.*

The Journey

On the twentieth day of October in the year 1811, a lone horseman riding south from the city of New York pulled his tricorne hat down tightly above his big ears and long nose to keep out the chill. He was a lanky man with elbows and knees that bobbed out at odd angles with each stride of his steed. A smartly groomed beard, lightly frosted with gray, along with green eyes that peered out through round spectacles, gave him an aura of erudition. A linen cravat warmed his neck, and over his tightly buttoned wool waistcoat, a heavy outer coat repelled the intermittent drops of cold rain. As twilight fell, the last autumn rays of the late afternoon sun flickered weakly through a thicket of trees. He rounded a bend in the trail, and to the west, he caught a last glimpse of the wide part of the Hudson River, designated by Dutch explorers long ago as Tappan Zee.

Taking a deep breath, he took in the smell of fallen timber and rotting leaves. He had hoped to be out of this forest, known by its inhabitants by the name Sleepy Hollow, before nightfall. He silently cursed himself for the last minute business that had delayed his departure and caused him to reach these dreaded woods so late in the day. An hour had passed on the trail since he had last seen one of the queer folk who inhabit this county, an old man with few teeth and whose plump legs straddled a plodding donkey. In his right hand, he wielded a knotted branch as a sword, slashing at the air as if reliving a battle from his youth against a phantom Redcoat. After each thrust, he would taunt his invisible enemy by bellowing "take that sluggard!" and "that will teach ye mule-brained maggot!" Only one eye had the look of reason within it while the other permanently looked off at an odd angle like the lifeless eye of a broken doll. The old man gave no indication that he was cognizant of the horseman's approach nor did he acknowledge the polite tip of the hat when they had crossed paths.

The horseman increased his pace and rode on, but he was beginning to wonder if, through some trick of Sleepy Hollow, he had lost his way. When the last hopeful twinkle of the setting sun was strangled by the night, the path became hard to follow. He took a wrong turn and had to

double back. The cool air of afternoon became the bone chilling fog of evening, swallowing up the bleak path ahead. The rider pulled his coat around him tight. As the birches and elms drifted by along his route, now illuminated only by the faint sickle Moon, the rider bobbed his head left and right, like a nervous rooster on the watch for a invading fox or owl. The occasional call of a whip-poor-will or the sudden hooting of a screech owl startled him into clutching the reins ever tighter. He hated being in these cursed woods after dark.

He considered breaking into a canter to reach his destination sooner, but he took pity on Cotton as the horse was no doubt exhausted from climbing hills and struggling through muddy bogs on the long journey. He'd named him after Cotton Mather, whose seminal work, the 'History of New England Witchcraft' had inspired him to take quill to paper and write his own amateur accounts of the supernatural. He'd investigated one ghoul that had been sighted multiple times by frightened souls at a Dutch church, and had even tracked down and interviewed the witnesses. That story had been published in the Mott and Hurtin's New-York weekly chronicle to his great satisfaction. When the newspaper had permanently shuttered its doors a month later without paying him, he had decided that a change in career was in order.

The pitfall of his fascination with the macabre was his unease at night. Especially this night. While he knew that he would reach his destination long before the witching hour, he still struggled to keep his fear in check. That foreboding was growing, gnawing at his innards. In the dim light of the copse he was traversing at a brisk trot, the prickly brambles he passed were demons groping at him from the underworld, the gnarled branches that occasionally brushed against his coat were the bony fingers of witches, and the rustling of leaves above him were hidden fiends ready to pounce. Every dire tale of witchcraft and apparitions he had read now haunted his mind.

His heart raced when he heard a twig snap behind him. He looked back over his shoulder and squinted into the darkness. There in the distance, he thought he could make out a shape, at the edge of his vision, darting among the trees with frightening speed. The rider exhorted Cotton to increase his pace and the loyal beast broke into a canter while he crouched down and began reciting a Psalm, "Why fum'th in fight", in hope of warding off this nefarious spirit.

Several minutes later, as if God had answered his call, he broke free from the woods and reached a clearing crowned with a green knoll, and from that vantage point he looked down and saw the rooftops of Tarry Town below. He heard no more sounds from the woods behind him and drew a deep breath of relief. Perhaps it had been his imagination or merely a screech owl on the hunt for prey.

He was a man of two minds; a superstitious one kindled by a wild imagination, and a rational one with keen powers of observation that excelled in matters of law. He had spent several years of intense study to develop the latter, and that rational mind now silently chided him for his earlier unwarranted fright. It was a flaw in his character that he knew could not be eradicated.

But now that his destination lay before him, his heart lifted and a smile spread across his face.

He reached into his saddlebag and pulled out a large apple. It was the last of the bunch he had purchased at the Tuesday market before embarking on this journey. Although hungry himself, he knew that Cotton needed it more. He reached forward with it, and the horse craned its head around and gratefully plucked it from his hand. A vigorous crunching sound ensued and tiny bits of apple fell to the dirt as the beast worked its lower jaw back and forth. When Cotton appeared to be finished, the rider and horse began the final descent into town.

Tarry Town

Local legend has it that the town got its name from housewives from adjacent farms who rued the fact that their husbands frequented the village tavern and tarried there on market days. But the first Dutch settlers who had begun farming the surrounding land fifty and a hundred years prior, had named it "Terwe" Town (Wheat Town) because the fertile soil was ideal for the growing of cereal grains. As industrious generations were born, planted, harvested and eventually returned back to their Lord, Terwe became Tarry to the English speaking farmers. That did not mean, of course, that the wise housewives were wrong about their delinquent husbands' proclivity for lingering there.

The village tavern, in addition to providing food and drink, also put up lodgers. The rider dismounted out front, patted Cotton's mane affectionately, then disappeared inside. As it was a market day, a raucous crowd of two dozen or so had thronged within, bellowing laughter, lifting glasses, and enjoying the tavern's fare. The rider strode past the tables of revelers and found a ripe woman, well past the traditional marrying age but not yet matronly, with cheeks as rosy as the apple he'd fed to Cotton. She wore an apron and was busy cleaning a tray of dishes, pausing only to issue instructions to a young man before he disappeared into a back room. The man noticed that her hands were rough from hard work. An efficient bun kept her thick brown hair out of her way. It was held together by the only colorful part of her otherwise drab attire, a bright and ornate turquoise clip. She turned to face him and he noticed a tiny scar on her left cheek below her big green eyes.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening. May I speak to the proprietor of this establishment, madam?"

"Yes, you may" she replied.

But she made no move to fetch the man. The rider looked befuddled, looking first left and then right, but no one appeared. He thought this might be some jest at his expense. His awkward appearance had invited such boorish practical jokes before. Before he could reply, the woman spoke again.

"You've spoken to the proprietor, sir. My name is Selah De Vries."

"Ah. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Madam De Vries" he said with a courteous nod.

"Selah, from the book of Psalms. Lovely name. May I inquire about a room?"

"And who is making this request, sir?"

"Ah, my apologies for not introducing myself."

At that moment he noticed that the tavern had grown quiet and a trembling finger was pointing at him from across the room. The heads at a nearby table had turned in his direction and were openly gaping at him. He turned to face the table and their faces turned ashen. A glass of ale spilled onto the table top, running the length of it, past a plate of smoked beef and yams, and onto the floor.

"My God" he heard someone say.

He had imagined this moment many times during his years in New York, and frequently during the ride north. How would people react to his return? What would they think of him? When he had last been seen, he had been but a poor wight, a pedagogue without a home, who earned very meager wages and relied on being quartered by his pupil's families. It had been a deeply humbling existence that required him to be ingratiating to his hosts, some of whom were not overly fond of providing board to a schoolmaster. To make ends meet, he had also taught psalmody to the young folks in the county. In his estimation, it had been a noble professional calling, but one rewarded with only paltry remuneration. The sum total of his life's possessions at that time would have hardly filled a feed sack.

To make matters worse, he had been on the receiving end of humiliations from a small gang of rough riders led by a brash and large man named Brom Van Brunt, who, owing to his Herculean stature, was widely known by his nickname, Brom Bones. Brom had threatened to 'double the schoolmaster up, and lay him on a shelf of his own schoolhouse'. He and his gang had smoked out his psalmody singing school by stopping up the chimney, creating an awful mess that required many hours of cleaning to remedy. They had also repeatedly broken into the schoolhouse and rearranged everything to embarrass him. He had been poorly fed at the time, not much more than skin and bones, and he had overheard chants comparing him uncharitably to a scarecrow in a cornfield.

He and Brom had vied for the affections of a coquettish girl, Katrina Van Tassel, and for a spell he had thought she was sincere in inviting his affections. She had joined his psalmody classes and even feigned interest in the poetry he had written. While others may have shrunk from contending with a broad shouldered and handsome rival like Brom, he had persevered in his courting of Katrina. And on that fateful day, when she had invited him to attend a merrymaking, his hopes had swelled as big as the ocean. But that night he had learned that it had all been but a ruse to stoke the jealousy and interest of none other than Brom himself. He had fled, utterly humiliated, on his borrowed horse, Gunpowder, and subsequently been waylaid by the Galloping Hessian, also known in these parts as the goblin and the Headless Horseman.

When he had awakened the next morning in the underbrush beside the bridge, a broken pumpkin beside him and his head aching and full of cobwebs, he had wiped off some of the dried blood from his ear and made his life altering decision. He would endure Sleepy Hollow no longer and start life anew. Unable to face the shame of retrieving his meager possessions and having already received his quarterly wages, insubstantial though they were, he had decided the time was ripe to embark on his journey. He made his way to the city of New York and initially earned some wages by keeping school and embarked on a short lived foray as a writer. Then his life's direction had taken an unexpected turn.

Although bitter for some time, he had come to forgive Katrina for her part in the calamity of those events. After a few years of reflecting on his time in Sleepy Hollow, he realized that she had been young, almost a decade his junior, and made an impressionable quarry for a dashing hunter such as Brom, notwithstanding his black heart. And his own motives were hardly above reproach, for while he had loved her, it was largely for her beauty and a potential inheritance from her wealthy father. During his years in the city, he had seen avarice drive men to unseemly acts, sometimes ghastly, and for his part he regretted the greed of his youth. As for Brom, while he never forgave the man for all the indignities he had inflicted upon him, over time his white hot hatred of the man had cooled into cold disdain.

He turned back to face De Vries, his eyes aglow with determination.
"I am Ichabod Crane. Do you have a room to let?"

The Word Spreads

Word that Ichabod Crane had returned from the dead spread through the county faster than a Biblical swarm of locusts. Ploughmen abandoned their fields and rode to their neighbors farms to share the impossible news. Dutch wives, spinning by the fire, dropped their wool and looked dumbfounded at the revelation. The legend of Ichabod's demise had taken so strongly in some that they refused to believe in his resurrection. The sentiment of many was that the man in Tarry Town must be an imposter who merely resembled the long deceased Crane. Others saw something more sinister: a specter returned and corrupted by the goblin.

Ichabod took his breakfasts at the tavern each morning and ate alone. Selah brought him a plate of eggs, a thick slice of ham, and a generous portion of Indian pudding. A young man named Jim cleaned the tables and swept the floors while Selah cooked in the kitchen. Ichabod noticed the boy had a pronounced limp, and upon closer inspection, was missing part of his foot and wore a boot cut down to its diminished size. He wondered if it was a congenital condition or whether some terrible accident had befallen the boy. Jim looked to be no more than fifteen years of age and Ichabod enjoyed talking to the gregarious youth when the boy's chores would allow. Jim told him of a beer maker from Boston who had stayed at the tavern a few months prior and instilled in the boy a great interest in brewing. But that interest that was thwarted, unfortunately, by a lack of equipment with which to experiment.

For the first couple of days, Ichabod set aside his business and savored life's little enjoyments.

Each day after breakfast, he checked on Cotton who seemed to be thriving in the cozy tavern stable, and brought him apples or carrots supplied by the ever courteous Jim. Then, after the morning sun had melted the morning frost with its warm kiss, he took his late morning ride in the countryside, down winding paths over dales and copses of elm and birch that he still recalled well from his youth. Cotton was large and powerful, and seemed to enjoy exploring the new territory. Afterwards, he would return to the tavern for his mid-day supper, then sit in a large comfortable chair to read until succumbing to sleep. Since his return had whipped the county into a frenzy of speculation, in the afternoons he also met old acquaintances, some friendly, others not.

Former pupils, now grown and working on farms with their own children, went into town to see for themselves if their former school master, thought to have perished at the hands of the demonic Headless Horseman, had indeed escaped that terrible fate. Two of those pupils, Abigail and Jacob Orhorst, had been joined in matrimony a few years after his apparent demise, and they, having quick minds and exemplary character, had been among his favorites. Abigail was in tears and when Ichabod kindly offered his hand to her, and he became flummoxed when the young woman threw her arms around him instead. He offered his sincerest apologies to them both for his abrupt and unannounced disappearance. Not everyone was tearful at his return, however. Some students, whom had earned the birch through poor conduct or delinquency, seemed less happy about his reappearance. Regardless, after meeting the man with an air of skepticism, most left satisfied that their former pedagogue had indeed returned to the living.

A red-faced and now white-haired Hans Van Ripper appeared on the second day. He rode up on a mule, wearing his work clothes, then stomped into the tavern and cornered Ichabod.

Ichabod nodded politely. "A pleasure to see you again, Mr. Van Ripper."

Van Ripper said nothing but got so close to Ichabod's face that it made him uncomfortable. After examining Ichabod intently for a moment, he finally stepped back.

"Aye. It be you."

Ichabod extended his hand, but Van Ripper ignored the gesture.

"Crane, your possessions are long gone and I won't be compensating you a penny for them." Ichabod had been boarding at Van Ripper's when he had disappeared. That had made the old man the executor of his estate, as paltry as that 'estate' was.

"That's quite all right, sir. I would not--"

"I cannot be expected to hold on to your things forever! Your books are gone." He declined to mention that he had personally consigned them to flames a day after the disappearance.

"I don't expect--"

“So if you plan to make a claim--”

“There will be no claims! You have my word on the matter.”

Van Ripper paused, looked at Ichabod suspiciously, then grunted his assent.

“So what happened to Gunpowder? Did he make his way back to your farm?”

“Aye. Clever beast appeared the next morn, none the worse for wear. He was a strong one. Least 'till the following Spring when he passed on.”

Ichabod felt a pang of sorrow, for that noble steed had truly done its best to outrun the goblin and carry him to safety. Ichabod was thinking of something to say in reply when Van Ripper abruptly turned around and headed for the door. “Be seein ya” he said, without looking back.

To Ichabod's eye, De Vries seemed amused by all the visitors, especially the cantankerous Van Ripper. On a couple of occasions, when some former acquaintance was examining Ichabod like a questionable cut of meat in a butcher's shop, he exchanged brief glances with her and thought he saw a ghost of a smile before she returned to her chores.

After dinner each night, he sat by the fire both for its warmth and for a light to read by. He usually started with a few passages from the copy of Ben Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack from 1758 that he had brought with him. It was full of pithy wisdom that made him stop and think, such as:

Pride that dines on Vanity sups on Contempt.

Prodigality of Time produces Poverty of Mind as well as of Estate.

Great Estates may venture more, But little Boats should keep near Shore.

He did not agree with that last one. He saw himself as a little boat that had ventured far from shore and it had made all the difference in his life. Sometimes people had to embrace adventure and trust in fate. After he had his fill of Franklin, he would pull out the novel by Jonathan Swift that he prized above all others, Gulliver's Travels Into Several Remote Nations Of The World. He truly savored its account of those exciting voyages of discovery to exotic lands where Gulliver meets the tiny people of Lilliput and the giants of Brobdingnag. Because he enjoyed the story so immensely and wanted to stretch out the experience over the duration of his stay, he read each page twice.

On the third morning at the tavern, Madam De Vries brought him his breakfast and then asked if she could sit at his table and discuss a matter. "Mister Crane, this is awkward, but would you be so kind..." her voice trailed off.

"Payment, of course, Madam De Vries! My apologies." Ichabod reached into his jacket and laid

a handful of silver dollars on the table.

"Sir, that is much more than the charge for room and board."

Ichabod shook his head and pushed his spectacles up on his forehead. "My stay has been very pleasant, the food sublime, and I would like to stay longer still." He put a few more pieces of silver on the table. "Perhaps another week. Will this cover the expense?"

She looked up at him, cocking her head slightly askew and crinkling her nose, a mannerism he had noticed before when she appeared perplexed.

"That is extremely generous, and I hope I am not being overly forward, but may I ask you a question? Are the wages of school teachers that great in the city?"

Ichabod laughed. "Indeed you may, and no, they are not."

That night and each night after, Selah De Vries joined him in the second chair by the fire when she had finished her chores, and the pair would chat about matters of small import. Since his return to the Hollow, people assumed he still worked as a teacher and Ichabod decided not to disabuse them of that notion. At least not yet.

Selah shared with him the goings on in Tarry Town and the politics of the county church. In return, Ichabod told her about the great crowds in the city, the large ships he had seen at port with decks a full twenty feet above the water line, and of meeting people from foreign lands. She was especially interested when he talked of ingenious machines he had seen such as the new high pressure steam engine and the advanced clocks from Europe. He took out his Lever pocket watch, carefully wound the spring, and then handed it to her. He told her it could keep time to within a minute per day. She put it up to her ear and smiled like a schoolgirl at the faint mechanical sounds emanating from within. Then she examined the clock face. It was the first watch she had ever seen, and she eyed it warily until the minute hand suddenly ticked forward on its own, eliciting a giggle from her.

When it was time to retire, usually a couple of hours after sunset, he would take his leave from Selah and pull out a candle that he had brought with him from the city (for he had known that no such extravagance would be available at the tavern) and set it alight with the glowing embers of the fire. Then with the flickering candle illuminating his way, he would return to his tiny room. There he would change into his bed clothes and pull out a rough cloth to diligently rub his teeth with tooth powder. He always thought of his mother when he did this and how devastated she had felt when she lost her front teeth to rot at just thirty six years of age. He had been a lad of fourteen at the time, and had hardly ever seen his mother smile after that.

Before climbing in bed, he would examine the cobweb of ropes that suspended the thin mattress of his fold down bed. It was important to even out the gaps amongst the ropes so that none were so large that the mattress would poke through on its way to the wood floor below.

This done, he would finally climb into bed and draw the blankets tightly around him to ward off the cold during his night of slumber.

Under A Dark Sky

On Friday night, from her chair by the fire, Selah noticed Ichabod break from his evening routine. Instead of turning in for the night at half past nine, he headed out into the night wearing his heavy coat, his prized book tucked under an arm. She wondered where he was going. To check on that horse he doted over? But if so, why bring a book? Was he going to read to the beast? The thought made her laugh. But after a minute, Selah crinkled her nose as curiosity got the better of her, and determined to solve this little mystery, she donned her coat and quietly followed him.

Once outside, she saw no sign of Ichabod, but knew it would take a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the night. A passing cloud shrouded the Moon, making the darkness nearly complete. As the landscape slowly came into focus, she noticed boot prints in the light dusting of snow that had fallen earlier in the day, and she began following them. It was deathly quiet and the only sound she heard came from her own breathing and the occasional crunch of snow beneath her feet. The trail led her to an elm tree at the base of the hill on the edge of town. As she walked past, she was startled by a bird that burst out from its branches, inches from her face. She stumbled and gasped aloud, then heard a voice up ahead.

“Who is there?”

“Sorry. ‘Tis just me. If you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing out here?”

There was a long pause before she heard Ichabod reply.

“Sketching.”

“In the dark?”

Selah made her way toward the higher ground, winding her way among the fallen branches and brambles which could barely be seen in the darkness. The Moon was emerging from its veil of clouds, and she saw Ichabod at the top of the hill. He was alternating between looking skywards and then back down at his book upon which he was scribbling. When she reached him, he pointed up upwards.

“The Great Comet. See it in the Great Bear’s tail?”

Selah looked up. As a child, her mother had told her about comets. They traversed the heavens for weeks at a time and were more than a million miles away, a distance she could not fathom. No one knew from where they sprang nor when they would appear. Some said they were harbingers of important events that would change the world for the better. Others believed they

portended war, suffering, and that a great evil would return to the land.

The vast expanse of the sky overwhelmed her. The blackness was dotted with countless stars, some white, others reddish or bluish, all twinkling like tiny jewels in candlelight. Her eyes followed the milky ribbon of stars to where Ichabod was pointing. There, near the North Star, was a wispy arc unlike anything she had ever seen before. It stretched all the way across the stars making up The Plow.

“‘Tis majestic” he said softly and with obvious reverence. “The greatest comet seen in at least a century, on its fateful journey towards the sun. I’ll likely not live to see another like it. I just wanted to record what I see for...”

The rest of Ichabod's sentence was lost to a sudden breeze that whistled through Selah's ears. She stepped closer to Ichabod as he continued his drawing and her shoe caught the edge of a stone. She stumbled backwards and might have taken an unpleasant fall but for the quick and surprisingly firm hand of Ichabod which darted out and steadied her. She thanked him and their eyes, now but a foot apart, locked for a moment until Ichabod leaned forward and whispered something in her ear. The unexpected intimacy made her blush.

She quickly tucked her hands into her coat and looked down at the frozen ground. Ichabod resumed his sketching. Selah watched the swirling wind pick up a leaf in its icy grasp, sending it fluttering upwards into the sky like a butterfly. Selah watched it rise in the starlight and then she gazed beyond it, back towards the faint arc in the sky. She wondered if the comet meant that some great or terrible event was coming. Or perhaps it meant nothing at all, and this night was simply a beautiful moment to remember.

A Ride Into The Past

The next morning, Ichabod decided the time was ripe for some reconnaissance. After a hearty breakfast, he walked to the stable with a few provisions and packed them into his saddle bag. He grasped Cotton's reins and walked him out of the stable. He looked up at the October sky and noted the gray clouds on the horizon.

It had been a month since his epiphany. He had attended a play with two thousand other enthusiastic theater goers at the magnificent Park Theater in Manhattan, a symbol of how far the city had come in its quest to become a cultural center that rivaled London and Paris. The well dressed patrons who arrived at this posh venue by foot or horse drawn carriage had to pass through a decidedly unstylish neighborhood to get there. The theater was ringed by a prison, a tent city of homeless squatters, and the local poorhouse. Wealth and poverty at close quarters have always been a hallmark of New York City.

The play, entitled *The Headless Ghost of the Thames*, was about the spirit of a decapitated nobleman who haunted the river of the same name in London in search of his murderer. It had been a mediocre production and the ghost had groaned too melodramatically in Ichabod's

opinion, but he had been impressed with the actor's costume. Raised shoulders and an elongated neck gave him the startling appearance of having no head. There had been audible gasps from the audience in the third scene when he had finally taken the stage. The woman next to Ichabod had recoiled so violently at the sight of him that she nearly knocked him out of his seat. And at that moment the realization struck him like a thunderbolt that it was possible, just possible, that he had seen a similar costume many years before.

Ichabod rode northeast from Tarry Town. He kept the edge of the forest on one side, and rows of farms on the other. North of town, a ploughboy, his trousers smeared with fresh soil, looked up from his labors near a wooden fence and raised his hand as Ichabod rode past. Further on, he passed a large field that only a month before had been bursting with rows of Indian corn. It now lay desolate save for a lone figure several feet above the ground, wearing tattered clothing and affixed to a wooden cross. Legs were askew at unnatural angles and leering out from the head was the crooked grin of the scarecrow.

At a fork in the trail, Ichabod slowed Cotton to a walk and turned up a steep and narrow path through the woods. A stillness was in the air and a light fog tiptoed over the land as softly as a lamb. All was silent except for Cotton's footfalls which were occasionally punctuated by a steam-emitting snort. He saw something dead and covered with flies on the side of the trail. The remains of a dog, perhaps. He didn't look closely.

He crossed a dried up creek bed and off to his right, behind a dead elm blackened by a lightning strike long ago, he could barely make out the remains of a half-burnt cabin through the trees. Something about it intrigued him. Was it really still standing? He rounded a clump of pines then rode past the blackened elm until the ruins emerged from the gloom. Cotton stopped short and Ichabod wasn't sure if he had accidentally pulled up on the reins on his own or whether the beast had decided on its own to go no further.

"Easy there, boy" he said in the most soothing voice he could muster. "This is fine. We need get no closer."

The cabin was the site of horrific violence shortly after the war. A returning soldier named Jacob Haas had slaughtered his entire family with a corn knife. Some said that he had fallen into madness because of what he had seen or done in battle, while others said it was witchcraft. During the killings, screams were heard by a neighbor, but by the time she reached the house, the wife and two children lay dead. She arrived just in time to witness the crazed look on the soldier's face before he pulled the hammer on his musket, splattering what was left of his poisoned mind onto the wall behind him. The wife and children were given proper Christian burials, and many people from the county attended to pay their respects. Haas's corpse was pitched into a hastily dug trench somewhere nearby, with the exact location being undisclosed to prevent mischief from juveniles and miscreants.

Ichabod had arrived in Sleepy Hollow the day after those ghastly events and attended the funerals. He could still picture the tear streaked faces of two neighboring girls with their hands

clasped, clad in their Sunday blue dresses, weeping because they would never see their friend again. It had been a sobering introduction to the Hollow, and even a couple of decades on, the memory evoked profound melancholy. From where does such evil spring?

The cabin had been set afire with torches, but strangely, had not burned to the ground, and apparently no man had been particularly eager to go back to finish the job properly. As Ichabod gazed at the cabin in decay, it smelled of rot and he could feel a presence within it. Something malevolent. Something calculating. Something that seemed to invite him to come inside and see it for himself. It was as if all the evil of Sleepy Hollow radiated from its grim interior and Ichabod felt a chill rise up his spine with the sudden and gruesome thought that the wall inside might still be stained with blood. He looked down at the ground beneath him and wondered how far from the house Haas had actually been interred. As if reading his master's growing unease, Cotton began slowly backing away from the cabin. Ichabod made no move until he felt a drop of liquid land on his neck. He reflexively cringed and looked up above him in alarm. A dark cloud hovered above the trees, and Ichabod felt another drop of rain strike his nose. Relief flowed through his limbs and he placed a reassuring hand on Cotton's mane.

"Good thinking, Cotton. At least one of us has horse sense." They rode off at a canter and Ichabod never wanted to return to that dark place again.

After a half hour's ride the sun reemerged, making Ichabod feel much better. He was amongst bright elms and watched squirrels scamper along the branches. He heard the songs of blue jays and the honking of geese. This rolling landscape in this part of the Hollow was comely and cheered his heart. He smiled at his earlier foolishness; it was already fading from his mind like a bad dream. Finding an elm in a clearing, he decided to eat his supper. First he fed Cotton from an oat sack he had filled in the morning, and then he took out a small meal of bread and cheese that Selah had made for him. He sat down with his back to the elm and took in his surroundings as he ate. A peace settled on him. After years in the city, he had almost forgotten how serene the countryside could be. He closed his eyes and tried to identify birds based solely on their call, a sport he had learned from his mother many years before. And he thought of Selah. He found her witty and smart in ways that he wasn't. And lovely. Much too lovely for him. Still, she was someone who made him want to stay in Sleepy Hollow a bit longer.

After his mid-day meal, Ichabod rode east and soon approached the last house he had visited before abandoning the Hollow decades before. Actually, the word 'house' didn't do it justice. While most farm houses in the county were one or two room edifices, this twelve room house could aptly be called a mansion, the most opulent home for thirty miles. Ichabod had been there on the night of the Van Tassel merrymaking, when the house had been thronged with guests in their finest clothes, the tables covered in a cornucopia of culinary delights, and the performance of the musicians sublime. It had been a glorious night for all the guests save one. For Ichabod, it had been a night that began with the humiliation of losing Katrina to Brom, worsened with the terror of the chase on horseback, and finally ended with the devastating attack on the bridge. Ichabod sat still in his saddle, momentarily lost by the powerful memories washing over him.

Ichabod kept his distance from the house. From his vantage point under a quaking aspen tree, he could see that the fields, which had been worked by many hands just weeks before, now lay barren after the fall harvests. A small shack beside the barn, usually occupied in the spring and summer months by the foreman, appeared abandoned because a large stack of picking crates blocked the front door. No one would enter or exit for the duration of the coming winter. Ichabod noted that the trail ahead of him forked, with the left path leading straight to the main house while the right curled around behind the barn.

Ichabod squinted and saw two figures, a man and a woman, walking through the barn door. A boy ran in after them. Brom and Katrina with their son? He noticed a negro boy with a big straw hat, likely their slave, working nearby with a rake. He appeared to be fourteen or fifteen years old. Ichabod had been studying law when the gradual abolition act had passed, so he knew the law wouldn't free this boy whose only crime was to be born a couple of years before it took effect on July 4, 1799. Freedom from Britain day. Fate was a capricious and cruel circus.

A moment later, Brom emerged from the barn and began shouting. Ichabod couldn't make out the words but he saw Brom backhand the boy and the straw hat fell to the ground. The boy made no effort to retrieve it. Instead, he stood obediently with his head lowered as Brom removed his belt. Katrina and her son strolled out of the barn, but when Katrina saw what was about to transpire, she took her son's hand and quickly led him back into the house. She was too far away for Ichabod to be sure, but he thought he saw a look of revulsion on her face before she disappeared inside. Or perhaps he just wanted to believe that the girl he had once loved would feel that way. He wondered if she regretted her choice of Brom all those years ago. He would never know.

Ichabod lowered his own head and felt powerless. The law of New York gave Brom this right. A twisted law. He remembered what Ben Franklin had said, late in his life, about slavery being an atrocious debasement of human nature. It certainly seemed to have had that effect on Brom. Sick to his stomach, he turned around with a gentle tug on Cotton's reins, then started off just before the first crack of the belt.

A melancholy Ichabod rode north until he reached a familiar giant birch. It rose high above him, and it seemed to him that its dark branches were unnaturally outstretched, but whether they were reaching out to him in welcome or in a warning to stay away, he did not know. He crossed a short wooden bridge over a creek, and on the other side of the black water loomed his old schoolhouse. It was abandoned and in disrepair, partly because school had been removed to another quarter of the hollow several years ago, and partly because, as he had learned from Selah the night before, it was reportedly haunted by none other than Ichabod himself. It amused him to imagine himself as such a fearsome spirit that the county had no recourse but to abandon the edifice and start school anew miles from this cursed spot.

The logs framing the single room were still intact, but the partly glazed windows had been put out. The sky had darkened again and the breeze whistled through a thicket of trees to his left. Ichabod heard a twig snap and thought he detected motion out of the corner of his eye. He

dismounted then spun slowly around in a circle to survey the changes in his surroundings during the years since his departure, and also to spy for anyone who might be lurking nearby. Satisfied that he was alone, Ichabod fumbled in his pocket for an apple.

"Here you are, my faithful servant", he said, extending his hand. Cotton's great nostrils gave the fruit several sniffs, as if to confirm it was juicy and ripe, before the beast snatched it away. Ichabod heard the chomping as he turned to approach the schoolhouse door.

All the window shutters were missing, perhaps pinched by some poor wight at a nearby farm, save for one that lay broken in three pieces in the tall grass. The door was ajar and clung to the wooden edifice by a single hinge on top. The lower hinge was missing, probably also pinched, and thus the door hung awkwardly askew, like a neck broken. Ichabod took a step inside, peering into the dimly lit room. He was not surprised that most of the desks were gone as they had probably been transported to the new school. A desk missing a leg lay on its side in the corner along with a pile of refuse.

He closed his eyes and in his mind the schoolhouse was new and he was a young man, fresh from Connecticut, nervous about teaching that lesson on his first day. The pupils were all in their seats, the youngest of them rapt with attention, their ears perked, their little eyes open wide. He had started that morning, twenty five winters ago, by reciting Psalm 23. The memory washed over him and he found himself reciting the lines aloud:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

In the years after the attack, the words had taken on additional meaning to Ichabod. The Lord had led him in the path of righteousness after leaving for the city. Somehow, he had been delivered from the evil of the Horseman in that valley of Sleepy Hollow. For years, Ichabod had believed that his survival on that night of terror was testament to this. But now, he suspected there might be another explanation.

As a young man with no inheritance and few opportunities in Connecticut, he had been excited by the prospect of becoming a man of some importance, a schoolmaster, in Sleepy Hollow. Ichabod had been filled with limitless hope in what the future held for him, the hope known briefly and ardently by the young, yet often only dimly recollected by the old after a lifetime of making accommodation with disappointment. Such was the case with Ichabod Crane. His romantic notion of a future with Katrina had been a mere oasis, evaporating before his eyes even as he had charged towards it with his dashed dreams. He remembered the first time he laid eyes on the beautiful and coquettish Katrina, and how she had lit up like a firefly on a warm June evening when he had given her psalms instruction on those Thursday nights so long ago.

Barely able to see in the dim light, Ichabod strode slowly to the wall where his desk had stood and where he had composed his lessons. He reached back into a gap where two logs joined and slid his finger along the crack until he felt a knot in the wood. Gripping its edges, he pulled at it but it would not come free. He took a step back and then kicked the log smartly with his boot. This time, when he tugged at the knot, it popped loose. Reaching inside the hole, he felt a small, rolled up parchment and carefully pulled it out.

It was the amateurish portrait of Katrina he had rendered long ago. It hardly warranted display in someone's home, but still, it was not completely without merit and certainly resembled the beautiful young girl. He tried to remember why he had hidden it so. Partly out of embarrassment should his drawing be discovered, and partly because he had felt so clever in devising such an ingenuous location in which to hide it.

He imagined the life not lived, taking her as his devoted wife, eventually becoming lord and master of her paternal mansion and lands. Her tempting red lips. Eventually children. He saw himself as a beloved father and gentle husband, respected by all in the county. He would have built a great schoolhouse for the children of Sleepy Hollow and paid its teacher a respectable wage. Beloved and renowned, men in the county would have sought his counsel on important matters...

The spell was abruptly broken by a menacing movement in the pile next to him, causing a startled Ichabod to leap backwards and bang his ear on the door frame. Cupping his head with his left hand and cursing himself, he stepped back outside. Probably only a rat. Cotton eyed him impassively as he chewed some grass. Ichabod shook his head at his own foolishness.

He rode on to the church-bridge that he and Gunpowder had crossed in a panic years before, and paused on the other side. He looked down at the ground where he had regained consciousness. Only fallen leaves and a broken branch marked the spot. Ichabod was standing, more or less, in the exact location where he had been knocked to the ground. He turned to face the bridge, and he pictured his last memory from that night: the Horseman on the bridge, head in his hand, or rather a pumpkin, winding his arm back to throw. He walked back to the Horseman's position, counting the paces. Twelve. A throw of twelve paces and the pumpkin had not been small. A difficult feat requiring great strength, no doubt.

He climbed back in the saddle and continued his journey. On top of a rise and amidst the surrounding locust-trees and elms, stood the whitewashed church, a beacon of light to drive away evil and darkness. It was deserted due to the late hour. He continued on to the churchyard and dismounted.

As he walked among the headstones, the somber surroundings moved him. The names etched in stone, some so long ago that no one still living had known them, seemed to call out to him. Like Ichabod, they had walked and breathed in Sleepy Hollow and most had known some measures of joy, sorrow, love, and heartbreak. Fate had smiled on some and frowned at others. In the center of the churchyard, he reached a tombstone he remembered well:

Wolfert Acker

1667–1753

Stranger, stop and cast an eye

As you are now, so once was I

As I am now, so you will be

Remember Death and follow me

On the other side was the headstone for the Haas wife and her two children. It's inscription simply listed their names followed by a heartfelt "Beloved by all, may they rest in Heaven". Ichabod knelt and said a silent prayer for them before standing.

At the edge of the churchyard, past even the small, humble headstones of the less prominent, was a grave marked by only a rotting wooden cross. Covered with withered grass and a scattering of leaves, it was the rumored final resting place of an unknown Hessian soldier decapitated by a cannonball during some forgotten battle of the revolutionary war. Some believed that his apparition sprung from this grave on a demon-eyed mount at midnight as the Headless Horseman, or the Galloping Hessian as others called him. Careful not to trample the grave, Ichabod knelt down and examined the ground. It was undisturbed with no tracks leading to or away from it. Ichabod rose and slowly shook his head. Over the years, he had come to think of himself as a man of God and he doubted that such evil could possibly lurk within a consecrated churchyard.

Encounter At The Tavern

That evening, when he returned to the tavern, there were several men with their backs to him, pints of ale in their hands. In the middle of the pack, half a foot taller than the rest, was a mountain of a man with broad shoulders and a powerful build. Brom. While the clothes of the others were well-worn and had seen too many winters, Brom was a man of means, with new clothes well-tailored to his unique stature. He had a booming voice that drowned out the others. The men turned to Ichabod as he strode across the room, and soon Ichabod was face to face with his old nemesis.

"Ichabod Crane! So you do live after all!"

"Brom Bones. You appear to live as well."

Brom looked him over. "You look much the same, save for a dash of gray above your ears. Are you still instructing urchins and boarding in the homes of their parents?"

Brom reached out and ran his large hand along the shiny brass buttons of Ichabod's outer coat. "Perhaps a wealthier class of families with better clothes to borrow?"

Ichabod took a step back from the outstretched hand and stumbled when he collided with a

chair, eliciting laughter from the men before him.

"You haven't changed much either, Brom. Still as charming as a water moccasin."

"Well. Not entirely unchanged. I've taken a wife" he said with a gleam in his eye. "You remember Katrina, I believe?"

"Distantly."

Brom chuckled. "So what happened that night in the hollow? Since the horseman didn't get you, what possessed you to skulk off?"

A man to his left, whom Ichabod remembered was part of Brom's gang, and whom Ichabod had suspected had locked him in the schoolhouse one afternoon by nailing shut the door, leaned forward with a sneer. "Yes, what affrighted you, schoolmaster? A little pumpkin?"

"Well, well, Mister William Jones. I remember you. Not apt for schooling, but completely in your element when a stable is ripe or when a fence needs mending."

The man straightened up and took a step towards Ichabod but was halted when the thick arm of Brom blocked his way.

Ichabod's first year of teaching had been William and Brom's last year of schooling. They had apparently learned little from their prior years in the schoolhouse and Ichabod suspected that his predecessor, a elderly man with hands that trembled when he took chalk to the blackboard, had given them passing marks to avoid incurring their ire. Brom was literate, but just barely so, and William could not read at all. Ichabod had volunteered to provide remedial instruction after school on his own time, but rather than be grateful for the generosity, the pair had taken his earnest offer as an insult. William had actually spat on him. They, along with a couple of Brom's other followers, began disrespecting Ichabod and pulling nasty pranks on him, inviting the snickers of the other pupils. All this made Ichabod's first year in Sleepy Hollow miserable, but he had refused to be intimidated, and when they did not complete their assignments, he gave them the failing marks they had earned. He had breathed a sigh of relief when, after the Christmas break, William and Brom had stopped coming to the schoolhouse at all. At the time he had been considering not returning himself.

"Now, now, Will" Brom said with a laugh. "Be congenial to our former schoolmaster. Crane, I'm sure that on your teaching wages you don't enjoy good ale very often."

The other men laughed at Brom's insult.

"Let me buy you a pint and you can tell us about your adventure that night. I'd enjoy hearing it before I ride up to Storm's Bridge tomorrow."

Ichabod stared at him for a moment, thinking. "Storm's Bridge?"

The big man shrugged. "Katrina's mother lives there now."

"Taking Katrina to see her mother for a couple of days?"

"Maybe just a night." Brom raised an eyebrow and seemed to study Ichabod for a moment. "So how about that pint, schoolmaster?"

Ichabod thought of the poor boy who had suffered at Brom's hands just a few hours earlier. The thought of imbibing spirits with Brom and these despicable men who had tormented him in his youth was as appealing to Ichabod as jumping into a bag of venomous snakes.

"A kind offer but I've had a long day. Good evening."

Ichabod rounded the corner and headed towards his room, tired from his long ride and looking forward to a good night's sleep. As he opened the door to his room, an explosion of laughter erupted behind him. On the floor in front of him lay a pumpkin.

The Attack

It was dark and something wasn't right. Ichabod had heard a noise and was now inching down a corridor holding a lantern in front of him to light the way. It had sounded like a metal blade being raked along a wood floor. It started then stopped again. The sound slowly grew louder so he knew he was getting closer.

Something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt it in his bones. Even the lantern seemed wrong as the flame within it was unnaturally dim, leaving the corridor more than a few feet in front of him as dark as a tomb. Something was extinguishing all the light in the world. The flickering lantern light splayed distorted shadows of him on the walls. They twisted and writhed like devils dancing around a fire pit.

He heard a muffled cry of a man in agony. He wanted to turn around and run for his life, but he had to help the man in pain, so he kept plodding forward. Something as cold and delicate as icy spider legs began creeping down his neck, but when he slapped at in panic, he felt nothing there save for beads of sweat. He collected himself and then continued down the corridor until he reached a massive door. Bizarre symbols were carved into the wood, some were of animals. One was of a cross, upside down. The largest was a pentagram, ringed by letters in an alphabet that Ichabod did not recognize. The door had no knob so Ichabod put a shoulder into it, but it did not budge. He heard the man's voice on the other side of the door.

"Flee, Ichabod!"

He recognized the voice of his father and took a step back from the door. Part of him knew he

should heed his father's words, but he couldn't abandon his own father. While he struggled with indecision, the door swung silently open. He saw his father lying some distance away. He appeared unharmed but his hands gripped the sides of his head, his face distorted in pain. A shadow, no, a creature passed over him and then assumed a grotesque dark shape. Sparks from a red glowing blade dragged along the floor. The sword now rising above powerful shoulders. Atop the shoulders, no face. Nothing there. A void. Shouts from his father to flee. Shouting.

Ichabod awoke with a start and sat bolt upright amid shouts and the shattering of glass. He dressed quick as lightning and returned to the dining room. There he saw two ruffians, clad in leather breeches and rough flannel shirts, clearly drunk and pawing at Selah.

"Get out of my tavern!" she was shouting as they laughed at her.

"Not until we get a look see" said the shorter of the two as he groped clumsily at her bosom while the much larger man attempted to pin her arms behind her back. She struggled mightily and with surprising strength managed to lash out once with her right hand, bloodying the nose of the man groping her. He staggered back and howled in pain.

While the two men were preoccupied with Selah, Ichabod was able to creep silently into the room behind them and grab a glass from the bar. While the shorter man cursed Selah and threatened to do dreadful things to her, Ichabod struck. He smashed the glass onto the man's head and saw the ruffian crumple to the floor like a rag doll dropped by a child. The big man spun around but did not release Selah. The numbers had suddenly changed, and not in his favor, and he looked at Ichabod menacingly as if considering his options.

Ichabod quickly sized up the man before him. He was missing the bottom half of his left ear and his barrel chest and powerful arms, along with a few tiny straws stuck in his curly hair, suggested he might be haystacker. Ichabod was no match for him in strength and the element of surprise was now lost. Nevertheless, Ichabod was resolute.

"Unhand this woman! I am Judge Ichabod Crane from New York and I will authorize constable Ignatius Peters to arrest you if you do not comply immediately."

The man's shoulders tensed, and Ichabod braced himself for an attack. For a long moment, the man seemed poised on a knife's edge, but then, the shoulders relaxed and with a single hand, he sent Selah sprawling on the floor.

"Now you will pay this woman what you're obliged and drag this man out and be on your way."

The man hesitated before reaching down into his companion's pocket to pull out some coins, and in a small act of defiance sent them clattering to the floor several feet away. Then, without a word, he proceeded to drag his companion outside, none too gently and with Ichabod following. He made light work of slinging him over his horse, like a sack of potatoes, before disappearing

into the night.

Ichabod returned inside and Selah was already sweeping away the broken glass.

"Does that happen often?" he asked.

When she stood up, he noticed a tear in her dress. He could see that she was trying to remain composed, but her attempt to maintain a calm countenance was belied by a tear welling in her left eye.

"No, not like that." She took a step towards him and placed her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Mr. Crane."

"Please, call me Ichabod."

"And Selah."

"Yes. Selah. Please, won't you sit down?"

"I will. I am feeling better now and will just sweep up this glass so all this can be forgotten."

While she cleaned up, Ichabod took a seat at the table by the fireplace. His hands were shaking so he hid them in his pockets.

"I know it is late, Selah, but could I trouble you for a drink? My nerves could stand steadying."

"Your nerves? They seem quite strong to me, and doubly so when they were most needed."

She smiled at him, and he felt a peace settle on him as he returned the gesture. He watched her as she pulled out a bottle behind the bar, and filled two glasses. She handed one to Ichabod and then sat down beside him.

"Are you truly a judge, or was that just a clever and brave figment of your imagination? I thought you were a school teacher."

Ichabod liked the way she said brave. He confided that after moving to New York, he had kept school during the day and studied jurisprudence at night, and in doing so, was very fortunate to catch the eye of a law professor by the name of Thomas Ellery. The professor had taken him under his wing and when Ellery was elected an Alderman, Ichabod became his assistant. Ellery had also enlisted Ichabod's help with his substantial business interests, and when they thrived over the next several years, he had been generous with Ichabod. Before his elderly benefactor passed away, Ellery had put Ichabod's name forward as a justice of the Ten Pound Court, a court that Ichabod had presided over for the past seven years.

"You must take pride in those remarkable accomplishments."

"Hardly! I was overwhelmed at first. But I was fortunate that another senior judge, Michael Bowls, was generous with his time and mentored me on the subterfuge often employed by disingenuous men in court. Only in time was I, on occasion, able to distinguish the worthy claims from the frivolous. So you see I am, in truth, something of a fraud."

Selah looked distressed. "A fraud? How so?"

"My achievement only came to fruition but for the charity of Ellery and Bowles."

"Hardly! You studied, worked hard, and sought the advice of those with more experience. That is wisdom."

She tilted back her glass to finish her drink and asked playfully, "And constable Ignatius Peters? Is he waiting for you outside somewhere?"

"No." Ichabod shook his head with a grin. "He was indeed a constable but retired long ago to Albany. My time on the bench has taught me many things about human nature. One lesson I've learned is that the most convincing lies are told brazenly and with copious detail."

Ichabod leaned back in his chair.

"What about you, Selah. How came you to Tarry Town? You weren't here when I kept school."

"We came two winters after you...vanished"

"We?"

"I had a husband. He was much older and decided he no longer cared for the back breaking labor of farming, and so he sold his land, bought the tavern, and brought me here."

Selah stared into her glass.

"Your husband...is he--"

Selah shook her head. "One night three winters ago after too much drink, he fell into a sour mood and took it out on me worse than usual, bloodying my face."

She pointed at the faded scar on her cheek and looked up at Ichabod. "He gave me this."

"But that night I thought, enough, and I struck him back. He flew into a rage, cursed me, and rode off into the snowstorm. The next morning, they found him at the bottom of the church bridge, his neck snapped, almost at the same spot where legend has it that you were attacked."

Many said it was the horseman, but I knew it was the drink."

Ichabod nodded.

"I went to his funeral but never shed a tear for him." She looked down at the table. "He was not good to me."

"No man has the right to act so cravenly with a lady."

"I'm not sure your fellow judges and their wives would describe a tavern keeper so."

Ichabod placed his hand over hers. "They might surprise you."

Selah looked up at him and smiled. She did not pull her hand away.

"So I have to ask you, what happened to you on that night so long ago?"

Ichabod recounted the events of that night. Going to the party at the mansion. He omitted how smitten he was with young Katrina. The ride from the party. The mad race with the headless horseman to the bridge. And finally, the last thing he remembered: the missile in the form of a head, no a pumpkin, flying at him.

He asked Selah if there had been any additional sightings of the horseman since his departure and she told him of three events.

"The first happened several years after you disappeared. A wealthy man from Philadelphia was passing through and stayed here one night. I still remember him. It was a market night and we were full. He drank his fill, was loud, and sang the praises of his rich and cultured city. He lorded it over everyone, like we were mere country bumpkins. He must've realized he wasn't earning any good will, because he bought a round of ale for everyone. His olive branch of peace and a free pint warmed several hearts, of course, because the residents of Sleepy Hollow are mighty forgiving when a free pint can be had. Anyway, after all the carrying on, the geezer slept late the next day and didn't ride off till the afternoon. He stumbled back a day later, with no horse, half dead, and with a dreadful lump on his head. The goblin had attacked him in the Hollow and unhorsed him with a throw of its own head! His horse must've run off, because when he woke on the ground, it was gone."

"Did he lose any valuables?"

"His horse, a substantial sum of money in the saddlebag, everything. The horse was never found. Taken by the goblin, so they say."

"Did he describe the horseman who attacked him?"

Selah rubbed her temple and looked up towards the ceiling. "Let me see. Huge, all in black, and had no head on the top of his grotesquely long neck. He had gripped the reigns of his mighty horse with one hand while the other held a head which looked like a pumpkin."

"I see."

"Does that match what you saw on your fateful night?"

"In every detail. Was Brom here that night before?"

"I don't remember. He might have been. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Can you tell me about the second attack?"

"It was ten years ago on All Hallows Eve. A despicable man named Albert Van Dorn." Selah shook her head with obvious disgust.

"His body was found in the Hollow near Major Andre's tree. A search of the surrounding wood turned up a horse with a saddle, but the head? They never found it. But that isn't the terrible part."

Ichabod leaned forward. "What could be more terrible than that?"

"When they brought the horse into town, Jed Green, the blacksmith, recognized the horse right away from shoeing him a couple of weeks before. So they began preparations for a proper church burial and a couple of men rode out to Van Dorn's farmhouse. First, some background. Two brothers had gone missing on the walk home from school the week before. Folks thought perhaps they had just run off."

"Well, the men who rode to Van Dorn's farmhouse looked over the property to see if he had any kin that should know about his demise. No one was in the house, but before riding back, they decided to check his barn in case there were animals there. No animals, but locked in a storage room in the barn, they found the boys, not more than seven and eight years old. They were alive, thank the Lord, but only just. He had done things to them...hurt them terribly."

"Oh my God."

Selah's eyes reddened and she wiped away a tear. "Well, after the little ones were returned to their wailing mother, the Christian burial of Van Dorn was off, of course. Instead, the corpse was ridden back into the Hollow and burned, giving his body the proper send off in flames for where his soul was going anyway."

"Are the boys all right? Or as well as could be hoped for?"

"I don't think so. They couldn't bring themselves to walk to school alone after that. Some of us brought the family some food afterwards, to check on them, but I could tell the family was just broken. They sold their farm a few months later and haven't been back."

They both remained silent for a spell, contemplating the tragedy that had unfolded six years before.

"Sorry to tell such a dreadful tale but you asked me."

Ichabod nodded. "In this case, it seems that the Headless Horseman struck in the nick of time."

"A few have said the same."

"And the third attack? When did it happen?"

"A year ago. The horseman hadn't appeared in nine years and folks thought that perhaps he'd stopped haunting the hollow. Moved someplace else. But that wasn't so. An elderly farmer, Jacobson, was attacked on his farm."

"Did he give much the same report? A headless rider in black?"

"We don't know exactly what he saw. His wife had witnessed the apparition the night before through a window. Thence, at the witching hour on the night of the attack, Jacobson heard an awful commotion coming from his stable. Something was terrorizing his horses and he loved them like the children he never had. Despite his wife's pleas, Jacobson headed out to defend them with naught but his determination and a shovel. His wife found him a couple of hours later, nearly frozen solid from the cold, lying in a field nearby, face up. He had a gash on his head and a look of terror was frozen on his lifeless face as if he had seen the devil himself. A broken pumpkin beside him. Poor man."

"Did his wife catch sight of the horseman again?"

"I don't think so. She sold her farm to Brom a couple of days later and moved to Philadelphia to be with her sister. She said she couldn't feel safe in Sleepy Hollow ever again."

"Sold to Brom?"

"His land adjoined Jacobson's, so he did a good deed and bought the widow out. She couldn't have managed the farm on her own anyway."

"Convenient for him, the horseman making that land suddenly available for quick sale."

Selah looked incredulous. "You think Brom is in league with the Horseman in some way?"

"I don't know."

Selah put her hand back on his. "Is that is why you came back?"

Ichabod suddenly fell ill. He heard a roaring in his ears and the room began to spin. As Selah watched in alarm, he turned pale and fell to the floor.

"Ichabod! What's wrong?"

Ichabod lay on his back on the floor and could not speak.

Selah knelt beside him and cradled his head in her arms. "Ichabod!"

After a few minutes the attack began to subside and Ichabod was able to whisper, "Water. Please."

Selah raced to the pump in the kitchen for a cup of water then helped him lift his head so he could drink.

"Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine. They usually subside in a few minutes."

"What is happening?"

"Attacks. Headaches. An unsought inheritance from my father."

"Oh dear! How long have you endured them?"

"My affliction began a year ago. My father got them about the same age."

"Did your father's attacks eventually go away?"

Ichabod nodded grimly. "Yes, after two years we buried him."

Seeking The Horseman

The next day, Ichabod's health returned. After a late afternoon supper which included an argument about whether Selah would accompany him, an argument that Ichabod lost, the two of them headed to the tavern stables. After giving Cotton an apple, he placed a small lantern to his saddle bag. Selah mounted a small mare, Pickles, and then they set off at an easy trot.

They rode north from Tarry Town across grassy fields punctuated by a smattering of trees. The setting sun cast monstrously long shadows that marched across the late October landscape like

an army of gray ghosts before eventually retreating into the black of night. Two hours on, a nearly full Moon rose and imbued the land with an eerie blue glow, silhouetting an owl, high on a branch, as it scanned the ground below for prey. They reached the Von Brunt farm at half past ten and left the horses at a hitching post behind the barn. As Ichabod pulled out the lantern, Selah tugged on his arm.

"Are sure they're gone?"

"The home should be empty." he said in a whisper. "Brom took them to Storm's Bridge, at least for the night, to visit Katrina's mother. But there's one way to be sure. Wait here."

He walked quietly over to the barn, opened the door and disappeared inside. After a moment he returned. "Their horses are gone."

The pair rounded the corner and walked up to the front porch. Selah turned her head to face Ichabod. "Come on. Let's see if it is here."

Ichabod nodded, lit the lantern, and then opened the heavy front door. Once inside, the flickering lantern light revealed the entryway and on the other side, a large staircase leading to the second floor. They climbed the stairs and upon reaching the landing, saw hallways going left and right. They went left and passed a sewing room, a study, and several bedrooms. The last bedroom belonged to Brom and Katrina, and this is where they began their search. They found nothing in the armoires, dressers, or under the bed. The room also had an opening to an attic and a large desk along one wall. Selah and Ichabod turned their attention to the desk and the smaller top drawer revealed nothing of interest. When Ichabod tried to open the large bottom drawer, he found it locked. He thought about forcing it but Selah stopped him and slid out the top drawer and reached underneath with her hand. After a moment, she pulled out a key.

"Got it. My husband hid a strong box key this way."

"You are more clever by half than me."

Selah smiled at the compliment then unlocked the large drawer. It contained a few papers but nothing of interest. It wasn't there.

Selah turned to Ichabod. "The attic opening is tiny. I'll go up and perhaps you can look into the desk in the study. When we peeked into it earlier, it looked like a room for Brom, with that painting of himself on that horse, another silly painting where he's holding a sword, some big silver cup he must have won in a competition, and the antlers of some buck he killed on the other wall. That man thinks very highly of himself."

Ichabod enjoyed the fact that she seemed unimpressed with Brom. He returned to the study and opened the desk drawers which were unlocked, but didn't find anything helpful. It would be too big for a drawer anyway, he thought. He noticed a knob attached to a half height door on the

wall below one of the paintings of Brom. Suspecting it was a storage cubby, he turned the knob but it was locked. He yanked on the door, but it was solid oak and did not budge. Momentarily stymied, he paused to think, then returned to the desk and slid out the top drawer as Selah had done. He felt underneath it and was rewarded with a key.

He unlocked the half height door, and inside he found a small box with some papers, including the deed to the estate and also the Jacobson parcel. Behind it, and pushed back into the furthest corner, was a large trunk. Ichabod pulled it out onto the floor. He opened it and inside was an enormous black cape with a black leather neck large enough to conceal a man's head. Eye holes would allow the wearer to see where he was going.

"So here is the mighty Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow" he whispered to himself.

"Well, well" said a booming voice behind him. "I thought you were too curious about Storm's Bridge."

Ichabod jumped back against the wall as if he'd been struck by lightning. Before him in the doorway loomed all six and a half feet of Brom Bones, and in the dim light of the lantern on the desk, he looked ten feet tall. The menacing look on his face was reinforced by the long hunting knife in his hand.

"You've trespassed and I'm within my rights to defend my home. You should not have come, Crane."

Ichabod tried to think. He couldn't get by Brom and even if he did, he couldn't outrun the more athletic man. He might be able, however, to alert Selah to Brom's presence if he could keep the loud man talking for another minute. Perhaps she could escape.

"Why do it, Brom? Why rob the man from Philadelphia and kill Jacobson?" he asked in a loud voice.

Brom stepped into the room and looked around to make sure no one else was there. Satisfied, he answered Ichabod. "Money. It takes a lot to keep up this place. And I only wanted to scare Jacobson off. His heart just gave out."

"No one will believe you."

Brom shook his head slowly and raised the blade. "You are a fool, Crane. No one will ever know."

Brom lunged forward with his knife but Ichabod surprised him by taking the only action he could think of: he dove sideways, and the blade slashed his arm instead of his chest. He heard Brom grunt with disgust, and then Ichabod, trapped in a corner, could only watch helplessly as the giant bent over him and prepared to strike the fatal blow. Ichabod instinctively raised his bloody

arm in a futile attempt to fend off his attacker, but another stab from the knife never came. Instead, Ichabod saw a blur of silver and heard a clang like a church bell. The knife clattered to the floor and the big silver cup fell beside it. Brom lay face down, barely moving.

Selah helped pull Ichabod to his feet, and noticing the gash in his arm, took the cravat from his neck and tied it tight over the wound. The pair then took the stairs, two at a time, and raced out the front door to the back of the barn where Cotton and Pickles were still tied up. They rode off at a gallop.

"Thank you for back there, Selah" he shouted over the thunder of the hoofs.

"I learned that trick from you."

After the initial burst of speed, they eased up to a still rapid but more sustainable canter, and the moonlit landscape flew by. Ichabod's arm was throbbing and he could feel blood continuing to trickle down his arm inside his coat sleeve. To take his mind off the pain, he began thinking about the process of bringing charges against Brom. For the robbery and the later assault on Jacobson that caused his death, Brom would spend many, if not all, of his remaining years in prison. Just before he and Selah reached the turn into the forest, Ichabod looked back and was horrified to see Brom atop a massive stallion and roaring after them.

"He's coming!"

Selah looked back then nodded. Ichabod could see equal parts of fear and determination in her face. "We'll lose him in the forest. Follow me!"

Selah led them off the main path, taking a series of narrow trails between the trees. The logic quickly became apparent to Ichabod: while Brom, perhaps the best rider in the county, was almost certainly faster on open ground, the narrow forest trails would disadvantage the larger horse and rider. They rode on, and despite crouching as low as he could, Ichabod was nicked and gouged on either side by invisible branches that reached out to stab him in the dim moonlight.

But Brom's skill on horseback was unmatched, and despite the unfavorable conditions, he continued to gain ground on Ichabod and Selah, albeit more slowly. Before long he was close enough for Ichabod, who was behind Selah, to hear the mighty black stallion's footfalls.

After they crested a hill, Ichabod suddenly recognized where they were. Up ahead was a colossal tulip tree; its massive and gnarled branches rising like the heads of the Greek Hydra, dwarfing the surrounding pines. It was at this very place that Major Andre was captured for treason during the war, and ever since the tree was said to be haunted by its namesake. It occurred to Ichabod that he was reliving the worst night of his life. Here he was at this same cursed spot near midnight and with the same horseman in hot pursuit. Only this time it was not just his own neck on the line, it was Selah's too. She was in danger and he had put her there.

He knew what he had to do.

"Selah! He's too swift! I'll split from you at the next fork and then he will pursue me alone!"

"No, don't Ichabod! We can elude him."

Ichabod glanced back again and Brom was right behind them. But that was not all. Ichabod saw another rider, his mount as gray as ash, fifty yards or so behind Brom. Where did he come from?

"Duck!" he heard Selah yell, and he just managed to dip underneath a branch that grazed his shoulder.

As he looked back, he saw Brom expertly slip to the side of his stallion, just one foot in a stirrup, until he cleared the branch and resumed his upright and aggressive riding position. The rider behind Brom had, amazingly it seemed to Ichabod, gained on them all. As he bobbed in and out of sight behind Brom, Ichabod couldn't get a clear look at him. Could it be?

He saw Brom look behind him, apparently finally aware of his pursuer. It occurred to Ichabod that Brom might not have heard him sooner because of the blow that Selah had dealt to his head. Brom turned his head back forward and Ichabod saw something that he had never seen before on that face: fear. And now Ichabod knew why. The rider pursuing them all was clad in black, there was a red glow in the eyes of his ashen steed, and most frightening of all, the rider had no head!

Brom dug his heels into his horse and gradually pulled even with Ichabod, but he made no movement to strike him, wholly focusing on eluding the terror behind. When the trail widened as it bent left over a shallow creek, Brom pulled ahead despite Cotton's valiant efforts to keep pace. Ichabod thought he saw the look of fear on Brom's face turn to smugness as he surged ahead and he knew why: the goblin was now directly behind Ichabod since Brom had broken clear.

Ichabod's arm was getting numb and he was finding it difficult to hold on to the reins. Blood loss was also making him lightheaded, so he knew he didn't have much time. Suddenly, the chilling metallic sound of a sword being unsheathed rang out behind Ichabod. He wondered if it would be the last sound he would ever hear. Knowing that his life was forfeit, he looked ahead at Selah riding frantically a few feet ahead, and the sight of her helped him resist the morbid fear that attempted to paralyze him.

"Save yourself, Selah!" he shouted and swerved left, to his doom and directly into the path of the oncoming Headless Horseman, hoping to provide her the margin of escape.

But the goblin cut nimbly to the right, and soon was galloping alongside Ichabod and Cotton. Despite feeling overwhelming dread, Ichabod turned towards the Headless Horseman and the

goblin rotated his torso, returning the gesture. The grotesque shape maintained this posture for several seconds and Ichabod had the distinct feeling that he was being observed, and perhaps assessed, by an invisible face. Then the sword glowed red, and when the horseman raised it, Ichabod began reciting a Psalm, preparing to meet his Maker.

But instead of striking, the horseman surged forward with a speed Ichabod had never witnessed nor scarcely thought possible. At first he feared for Selah, but the goblin quickly blew past her like a demonic wind from Hell. He rapidly closed on Brom, who had now pulled twenty yards ahead of Selah and was riding for his life. The goblin drew back his sword and when Brom turned his horrified face in the goblin's direction, Ichabod heard a clap of thunder as the sword swept down like the sickle of Death, slicing off Brom's head. It flew in the air and the horseman surged forward and caught it by the hair with his other hand, even as Brom's body fell lifeless from his mount to the forest floor. After a flash of lightning that temporarily blinded Ichabod and seared the branches of nearby trees, the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow sped down the path at unearthly speeds until he vanished from sight around a bend.

Farewell

Brom's mighty stallion was never seen in the Hollow again. Some claim it made its way to Albany where a lucky cooper named Tom Gambles, fresh from rounding out the top of a barrel, saw the rider-less horse approach him. It was thirsty, and after earning its trust with water, Tom searched the saddle for any evidence as to its rightful owner. Finding none, he claimed the horse as his own. But old wives claim, and they are usually correct in these matters, that in its terror, the stallion galloped all the way to Philadelphia before dropping dead of exhaustion within sight of Freedom Hall.

Ichabod lost consciousness when they reached Tarry Town. Selah got him into the tavern and tended to his wound before relaying the story of the horrors of the night before to a group of townsmen who then set out to find Brom's body. His headless corpse was found a few minutes ride from Major Andre's tree, and the men were shocked to discover that not a drop of blood had spilled at the scene, the wound apparently cauterized by the searing heat of the unnatural blade that felled him. When they rode to Brom's farm, they found the black costume still in the study as Ichabod and Selah had attested, further corroborating their story.

Later, over Ichabod's sincere and futile protestations, Selah told everyone that Ichabod had studied law and was now an esteemed judge of the Ten Pound Court. Most of his former pupils and their families, including Abigail and Jacob Orhorst, were impressed with his new station in life. Hans Van Ripper was not.

After several more days at the tavern, it was finally time for Ichabod to return for the remainder of his court term. With his right arm in a sling, he slowly packed his things and stuffed a few apples into the saddle bag, in preparation for a melancholy ride back to the city. It was a chilly morning, and frost clung to the ground like stubbles on a hoary beard. Cotton was rested from his heroic efforts during the night ride of terror, and that rest along with a steady diet of oats and

hay had restored his vigor. He whinnied and stamped his hoof when Ichabod entered the stable, seeming eager to embark on the journey. Ichabod tightened the saddle straps then ran his gloved fingers over his mane.

"I'll return momentarily, my faithful friend."

He walked back inside to say his goodbyes to Selah. From the dining room he could hear her giving some instruction to Jim in the kitchen. He walked over to the fire to warm his hands, then remembered something. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the drawing of Katrina he had rendered on an afternoon at the schoolhouse long ago. As he was looking at the portrait of the beautiful young Katrina, now a widow, Selah walked in and smiled at him with a different kind of beauty, one shaped by more years of life and with a kindness and intelligence behind her lovely eyes. After she rounded the corner with a bucket in her hand, Ichabod crumpled up the drawing and dropped it into the fire. When she returned, Ichabod told her that it was time for him to depart; he wanted to reach the city before nightfall.

"Do you have worry about riding out through the Hollow?"

"I have thought about that, and I don't believe I need fear him. He could easily have dispatched me on the trail but did not. His only real attacks, not the ones carried out by Brom the imposter, ultimately saved the lives of two small boys, and then, a few days ago, my own sorry skin."

"And mine."

"At first I thought he might be the spirit of Major Andre, who, denied justice himself in this life, seeks to uphold it in the next. But now, I think I know him. He turned to me, during our flight through the forest, and I felt a presence. Something terrible to behold, yet not evil. I think he is Azrael, avenging angel of God. The Bible says he was revealed to David to be between the earth and the heaven, with a drawn sword in his hand. I could be wrong, but that's how I see the Horseman. Not of this world. God's instrument of justice."

"You may be right."

"But all the same, I would prefer to reach the city before night falls."

Selah frowned and approached him. Before he could say another word, she stood on her tiptoes and whispered "don't forget me", and kissed him for the first time.

To Ichabod, it wasn't the ardent yet fleeting kiss of unknowing youth; it was better than that. It was life's promise, broken long ago, now restored. He embraced her with his good arm for a long magical moment afterwards until the thought of his affliction broke the spell.

"I shan't, Selah. But my father...I may not have very long--"

“--None of us know when we will be called. Just come back.”

He paused for a moment, considering her words, before replying. “I will. Expect me on the first Saturday of December after my current term ends.”

He took out his pocket watch and placed it in her hand. “I want you to have this” he told her. “It will help you mark the time till I return.” What he didn't tell her was that he had decided to return to Sleepy Hollow with a ring.

Epilogue

Selah smiled at the children singing Psalm tunes. A few had tears in their eyes but they sang on and the parents who gathered around them beamed with pride. When they finished, the minister spoke as cheerfully as he could of the wonderful gift of life, the love of friends and family, and eternal life with God in the hereafter. Selah thought of her husband.

When Ichabod had returned to Sleepy Hollow it had been for good. He'd ridden back with two other men and a couple of wagons full of his belongings. He'd given that ring to Selah and confided in her that his business interests with Ellery had grown substantially, and when combined with the sale of his large home, it had added up to a fortune.

Ichabod hadn't lived for mere year or two longer as he had feared, but for fifteen. Although the headaches had knocked him down periodically, they hadn't worsened until just before his death. They had not prevented him from experiencing the bliss of married life with Selah, or from becoming a proud father, or from teaching now and then at the school when the schoolmaster was sick or needed a respite from the unbridled enthusiasm of too many boisterous children within a confined space. They also hadn't precluded his teaching Psalmistry at the church nor silenced his frequent laughter with friends.

Ichabod never saw the Headless Horseman again, at least outside his dreams. In one such dream, the Horseman had called on him to destroy the Haas cabin. He had needed that call and returned to that wretched place with some men and highly inflammable whale oil, burning it so completely to the ground that the spring rains washed away even the ash.

Selah turned to Abigail Orhorst standing next to her. She was of course sobbing, and Selah thought about what a blessing it was to have this dear and emotional younger friend in her life. Selah was getting on in years and didn't make it to the tavern as often as she used to. She lived just a short distance away in the house Ichabod had built for her. He had brought in craftsmen from the city to do the construction, and while it wasn't quite as large as Katrina's mansion, Selah knew it was actually the finer home. Not that she said so.

Jacob and Abigail had taken on most of the day to day operation of the tavern, which years before she and Ichabod had refurbished and expanded in size. Jim stayed on, of course, but now spent a good deal of his time in the new room they had been added that was stocked with

the latest brewing equipment from Boston. Jim made a variety of beers that drew in a surprising number of patrons around the county, especially on market days when the farmers liked to tarry.

At her other side was a lanky boy of fourteen, already a few inches taller than her. She could see his head tremble even as he tried his best to maintain a brave face. Young Ichabod had his father's kind green eyes, and knew all about the night of terror and their encounter with the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow. Selah took his hand and whispered in his ear.

"Your father told me a couple of days ago that the Horseman, Azrael, came to him in a dream. He was silent but handed Ichabod a sword. Not his own sword but another like it. I think that is where your father is now. With God and on the side of the Angels. Watching over us and others."

The boy turned to his mother and smiled.

Later that night, people came to the tavern to pay their respects and share stories about Ichabod. There were a few tears, but mostly laughter as people spoke of their neighbor and friend. It was bittersweet for Selah to hear the warm recollections of her husband. It felt like a fairy tale that had come to its melancholy ending. She was grateful for the company but spoke less and less as the evening wore on, drifting away into reflections on her own life and retreating to the memories of her years with Ichabod. She also thought of what she had told her son about the meaning of Ichabod's dream and hoped it had comforted him. She only half believed it herself, but perhaps that was enough.

At half past nine, she slipped out the front door and into the darkness. The clouds from the afternoon funeral had cleared, leaving a thousand points of light twinkling in the coal black sky. She walked to a familiar elm at the edge of town and then up the hill behind it. It was a bit of struggle for her now in her fifth decade of life and she had to catch her breath at the top. Once there, she reached into her coat pocket for a book and pulled it out gently, lovingly, and held it with the reverence accorded to a precious family Bible. It was a faded copy of Gulliver's Travels. She turned to the last page and there was the hand drawn sketch of a comet's brave journey across the background stars on its way to oblivion. Below this was written "As seen by Ichabod and Selah on October 25, 1811".

Exactly fifteen years before to the day, she had stood on this spot with him. She had stumbled and he had caught her. She closed her eyes and could see him, young again and standing there on that starry night, his eyes locked on hers. She remembered the words he had whispered to her.

I'm so happy to share this moment in time with you, Selah.

A beautiful moment to remember.