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‘Haunted Astoria’

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Just A Light

Colorful leaves wallpapered the streets of Astoria as I hopscotched past rain puddles. No rain was falling, but the air was so moist that droplets formed in my hair as I hurried to my appointment with local resident Zack King at the Labor Temple Bar.

I pushed through the doors into a cloud of warm diner smells that made my stomach rumble. Eleven a.m.; not time for lunch yet but close enough for my body to think so.

My meeting was in the back bar area, which was empty due to the early hour. As I was ordering a Pepsi, a man slid onto the barstool next to mine.

“Shot and a beer, Marci.”

“Just one shot?” the bartender asked.

“Make it two. He’s buying.”

At my nod, Marci left to fill our order. My guest was a tall, thin-framed man swallowed by an oversized hoodie. His head hung low and he stared forlornly at the bar before him. When Marci placed our drinks on the bar he picked up the first shot glass and downed it like medicine, then slapped the glass on the bar and picked up his beer. I watched his throat convulse as he downed half before finally turning to look at me.

“Where’s your notepad? I thought you were a reporter.”

I am a reporter, of sorts. My name is Tim Ericsson and I’m a collector of paranormal stories. My work has taken me all over North America, and my time in Astoria has proven most fruitful.

I discreetly removed a small pad and pen from my coat pocket and said, “Take your time; I’m ready when you are.”

He appeared to shudder at my words, then said, “I need money. That’s the only reason I agreed to talk to you.”

Reaching for my wallet, I laid \$50 on the bar and his hand quickly covered it.

“It’s not enough, but I got no choice. I lost my job and had to move in with my mom.” His head dropped down again. “I only told the story in the first place because it got me some free drinks.”

That didn’t appear to require a response so I waited him out. After a moment he downed the other shot and began his tale.

I drank too much that night at the Merry Time Bar. I ended up on the Riverwalk trying to clear my head and since it was so late I decided there was no point in going home. I had a job as a deckhand on a fishing boat and it was getting close to time for work. I stopped to rest at the Maritime Memorial under the bridge and I noticed a boat in the water heading to shore. It was black out there, but as it got closer I realized it was a huge canoe covered with carvings. There were six native American people rowing it and in the middle were two strange passengers: a headless man and a woman holding a head in her lap!

At this point, he stopped to drink more of his beer. I caught Marci as she walked by and ordered him another.

‘So I’m shaking my head to try to clear it, sure I’m imagining this whole thing. The canoe slides up on the shore, and then the headless passenger turns his body toward me. I hear a voice, and it’s coming from the head the woman is holding. I don’t know where to look, the body or the head!

“Hey, boy,” he says, so I look at the head. He’s wearing an old fashioned hat and has a pipe in the side of his mouth. It looks like he only has one eye.’

At this I gasped, “Comcomley!”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Of course I have!” I answered. “He was the leader of the Chinook people from the 1790’s until he died in about 1830. He was an important part of the original Astoria settlement here and three of his daughters married prominent members of the Pacific Fur Company.”

“Yeah, well, I hadn’t heard of him until I met him that night. Do you know what happened after he died?”

“Yes,” I said. “A physician from the Hudson Bay Company stole Comcomley’s head. It was on display for over a hundred years in a museum in England, and then for more than twenty years right here in Astoria at the Flavel House Museum. Chinook people finally got it back and buried it in a graveyard in Ilwaco, Washington.”

“Well, take it from me. The Chinook may have retrieved his head, but Comcomley is still holding a grudge.” Zack shook his head and continued his story.

‘So I’m trying to make sense of a situation that makes no sense at all. How can a headless man be talking to me?’

“Boy,” Comcomley says, “what’s your name?”

“Zack King,” I manage to choke out.

You wouldn’t think that talking to a detached head could get any stranger, but right at that moment I felt a cold breeze unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. The head smiled a creepy smile and then he says: “Do you have a light?”

“No,” I say. “I quit smoking and don’t carry a lighter anymore.”

“No light?” he says, and frowns. “How can I smoke my pipe without a light?”

At this, the woman holds the head higher so I can see the pipe better.

“I don’t know, mister. But I don’t have a light.”

Now the water around the canoe started to froth a little. Not waves, just some bubbles.

“All I ask is a light,” he says, in a louder voice.

The water started to churn seriously now. The canoe wasn't moving, but there seemed to be a squall in that part of the river. I stepped back from the shore, trying to decide if I should run and if the headless body would chase me.

"Just a light!" Comcomley shouted. "A light for your life!"

This is when I decided I needed to get out of there. There were three foot waves all around the canoe, but it sat still as a stone.

"Okay, no problem," I say. "I'll get a light for you. I'll be back in no time."

"No, Zack King." Comcomley says, holding up his hand. "If you have no light for me, you must become my slave. You will paddle my canoe when it is dark and always search for the light."

Then the canoe slid off the sand into the river and they began to paddle away. But as they left I looked at the paddler in the back, and it was me. I was paddling that canoe.'

Zack finished his beer and pushed back his barstool.

"Now, every night I paddle that canoe from night to morning. At first light I find myself back in bed. I can't work, I can't do anything except sleep and paddle, forever."

I was feverishly writing his words when a chilling breeze whistled through the room. I felt Zack's eyes on me and looked up to see him smiling unsettlingly.

"Hey, Tim," he said. "Got a light?"