

GRIM AND Ghostly STORIES

A Haunted Canada Book



PAT HANCOCK
& ALLAN GOULD

 SCHOLASTIC

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PAT HANCOCK
and ALLAN GOULD

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The Sleeping Boy

Something was wrong with the VCR. A young woman sitting near the front of the bus got up and fiddled with the buttons.

“It’s the tracking. Adjust the tracking,” somebody called from a few seats back. Impatiently, other passengers began to chip in their two cents’ worth.

“Eject it and try again.”

“About time they got DVD players on these tin cans.”

“Keep it down, buddy. I’m trying to sleep. Why don’t you do the same?”

“Cool it, will you? I’m trying, I’m trying,” the young woman said.

Tempers were flaring. The driver knew he should do something. But at that moment, the VCR was the least of his worries. He was having trouble controlling the bus.

The passengers near the front were the first to



notice. Two men in the seats closest to the door began to nudge each other and whisper. A woman in the second row told the child beside her to sit up straight.

Gripping the steering wheel with one white-knuckled hand, the driver flipped on the loudspeaker with the other.

"May I have your attention, please?"

"Fix the movie."

"Shut up."

"Shhhhhh, be quiet."

Finally the din faded to a low murmur and the driver tried again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, sorry about the movie, but right now we've got a bigger problem."

Although his heart was racing, he tried to look relaxed. He didn't want the passengers to sense how worried he was.

He took a deep breath and continued. "The engine seems to be losing a bit of power. Now, it's nothing to worry about. I just want you to know, that's all, so you won't be surprised if I have to pull over. If I do, would you kindly stay in your seats until I give you further instructions? And, uh, how about we just turn off the TVs for the moment?"

He pushed a button. The two screens went black. Then he leaned forward, focusing intently on the mountainous highway ahead. This was a difficult

stretch of road — about thirty kilometres of twists, turns and steep grades before it linked up with the Trans-Canada. Definitely not a great place to run into problems.

At least the road was bare and dry. It had been two weeks since the last snow, and crews had long since finished sanding and plowing. Still, even under ideal conditions, a big vehicle like the bus needed full engine power to keep rolling. And right now, no matter how hard he pressed the accelerator, the bus was losing speed.

With dusk falling, the driver didn't want to be stranded at the side of a mountain highway with twenty cold, hungry, angry passengers. It might take hours to get a replacement bus. And that was assuming he could even get in touch with head office. For all he knew, the radio was on the fritz, just like the VCR.

He'd first noticed the trouble on the last long, steep grade. The bus had definitely lost power.

But what had really hardened the knot of fear that was forming in the pit of his stomach was the way the bus had headed into the oncoming lane — all on its own. In vain, he had wrestled with the steering wheel, trying to pull it back to the right.

He'd panicked briefly as they'd approached the crest of the hill. Was another bus, car or truck thundering to meet them head on?

Mercifully, the lane had been clear. But, as the bus coasted down the other side, still on the wrong side of the road, his fear grew.

He wasn't the only one who was scared. One of the two men in the front seats leaned over and asked quietly, "Are you having trouble with the steering?"

Before he could answer, an older woman farther back called out, "Driver, shouldn't we get out of the passing lane now?"

Other voices joined in.

"Come on, mister. Get over."

Once again, he flipped on the loudspeaker.

"Okay, folks, could we keep it down a bit, please? No point in getting everyone upset."

He paused until the bus was quiet, then went on.

"Look, I'm going to give it to you straight. I'm having a little trouble steering this baby. She's got a mind of her own at the moment. But we're still on the road, and we're obviously not speeding, so... Holy cow! Hold on!"

Without warning, the bus lurched forward, then fishtailed. For an agonizing moment, it slid sideways along the highway.

Finally, it came to rest, pointing directly at a snow-covered side road. Then it began to move again — straight up the narrow road.

Pandemonium broke out behind the driver.

Screams of fear filled the bus. A child started crying. Some adults did, too. One woman began to pray.

"I've had it," bellowed a man in a checked jacket. He picked his way up the aisle over the jumble of bags and coats that had spilled out of the overhead luggage compartments.

"Who do you think you are? Where'd you learn to drive?" he shouted when he reached the driver.

"Look, mister," the driver shouted back. "What do you see?"

He held his hands in the air as the steering wheel swung first to the right, then to the left, all on its own.

"And there?" he continued, pointing to his feet. They were planted firmly on the floor, not on the pedals. "I'm not driving this thing, buddy. I wish I were."

Horrificed, the man backed up and fell into the doorwell. He pushed himself up and began to pound on the doors.

"Stop the bus! Let me out," he shrieked.

"Take it easy, fella. I'd stop if I could, believe me. I want out just as much as you do."

News of what was going on spread among the passengers like wildfire. Many of them began to shout and cry. The young woman who had tried to fix the VCR slipped out of her seat, crouched down on the top step, and began to talk quietly to the frantic man at the door. At the same time, the driver started talk-

ing over the PA system again.

“Please, everybody, stay in your seats,” he pleaded, trying desperately to sound calm. The last thing he needed was a busload of hysterical passengers. He already had enough on his mind.

He cleared his throat and went on, “Look, I don’t know what’s happening any more than you do. The doors won’t open. The steering wheel is useless, and so are the brake and accelerator. It seems somebody has us under remote control.”

He swallowed hard, trying to control the quaver in his voice. “I’ll keep doing what I can. But it would really help if you would try to stay calm. I know that’s not easy. But if we panic, somebody is bound to be hurt. So far, nobody has been. And whoever — or whatever — is driving this bus is at least keeping us on the road. See? We’re bouncing along nice and slow.”

A fresh chorus of shrieks broke out as the bus swerved round a bend. It skittered off a pile of snow a plow had left at the roadside, then straightened out and went on.

Over the clamour, the driver tried to make a comforting joke.

“So, maybe he — or it — is new on the job, right?”

When nobody laughed, he continued. “Look, I know this road. We’re on our way to Silver Lake — whether we like it or not. Someone will be there to

give us a hand. Say, how about a little song? I bet the kids would like a song.”

Clearing his throat, he began to sing in a deep voice.

“My eyes are dim, I cannot see...”

A few others joined in weakly.

“I have not got my specs with me...”

The chorus grew steadily louder until most of the passengers were singing nervously.

“I have not got my specs with me.”

As they sang, the bus bounced forward jerkily, slithering on the bends but always clinging to the road.

An uneasy calm settled over the passengers. Most of them sat quietly, glancing out the windows or staring at the back of the seat ahead.

The driver had stopped trying to fight the nightmare. Still, he kept his hands lightly on the steering wheel and a foot poised over the brake pedal, just in case things returned to normal.

Suddenly, the bus rounded a bend and the village of Silver Lake lay ahead. A dozen or so low, wooden buildings lined its short main street. A ski lodge was nestled on a tree-lined slope above the village.

Between the trees in the distance, the setting sun reflected off the icy surface of a lake. It was a beautiful, peaceful scene except for one thing — the short

street was jammed with traffic.

Some of the passengers began to clap while others gave a half-hearted cheer as the bus rolled slowly up the street, then came to an abrupt halt in front of a small general store. And there it stayed, right in the middle of the road.

"Now what?" the driver said to no one in particular. Outside, a crowd was gathering, waving to the passengers inside.

Cautiously, the driver reached for the lever that controlled the doors. He pulled it back, and was surprised to hear the familiar "whoosh" as the doors parted.

Gingerly, he tapped the horn. The loud honk startled the people in front of the bus. He grinned sheepishly and waved an apology. Then he stood and faced his passengers.

"Well, folks, I guess this is the end of the line. Let's see if we can find out what's going on."

As an afterthought, he started to add in his official voice, "And don't leave any valuables on the bus. Blueway is not responsible for..."

Before he could finish, people leaped from their seats and pushed past him. Like every good captain, he waited until the last passenger was safely off. Then he left, too.

The scene outside was confused. A truck driver

gestured wildly as he described his experience to the crowd.

"There we were, totally unable to do anything and..."

A woman in a turquoise ski suit interrupted.

"We were picked up. I swear it. My husband says I'm imagining things but, believe me, something picked up our van — the tan one over there — and moved it. Moved it right off the lane up to our chalet and onto the main road. Then it pushed us back into town, too."

"That's ridiculous," sneered the passenger in the checked coat. "You must have skidded on some ice. Made it seem as if you were airborne, that's all."

"The road was bare," the woman shot back huffily.

"You been drinking, lady?" another man asked.

A tall, grey-haired man stepped forward and said, "I haven't touched a drop in years, and the same thing happened to me and my wife. That's our Chevy over there."

The bus driver moved up beside him. "I wasn't drinking either. Mind you, we weren't picked up or anything. But we were...pushed. That's how it felt — as if something was pushing us around like a toy."

"This is crazy. I'm getting out of here," a voice shouted. Others joined in the chorus.

"Me, too."

"Yeah, come on. Let's go."

"Don't go — not yet."

The bus driver swung around. The last voice had come from behind him.

"Who said, 'Don't go'?" he asked.

"I did." An old man wearing a leather hat with fur earflaps jostled his way through the crowd. His grizzled beard rested on a wool scarf tucked inside the collar of his parka.

"Don't go yet," he pleaded. "It's not safe. Can't be. Otherwise he wouldn't have brought you here."

"Your brain's frozen, old man," one of the bus passengers yelled.

A woman pushed her way to the old man's side.

"Just a minute," she said firmly. "Don't you talk to Seth that way. He knows this area like the back of his hand. Show some respect. Now, Seth, what did you say?"

"He brought them here. Something's wrong somewhere and he brought them. Wait and see."

"Who's 'he'?" the driver asked.

"Yes, Seth. Who is 'he'?" the woman asked gently.

Silence had fallen over the crowd. Everyone was listening now, waiting to hear what the old man would say.

"The boy."

"What boy? Where?"

“The Sleeping Boy.”

“The Sleeping Boy? Seth, what are you talking about?” Now even the woman was beginning to sound skeptical. “The only Sleeping Boy I know is the island in the lake.”

“Yep, that’s him,” the old man nodded, clamping an old brown pipe between his teeth.

The woman turned to the driver and explained.

“There’s a small island in the middle of the lake — beyond the trees, that way.” She pointed into the darkness. “It’s hard to see it now that the sun’s gone down. Besides, it just looks like a huge lump of snow at the moment. The first settlers along the lake called it The Sleeping Boy because that’s what it looks like from shore. The name stuck.

“People have been making up stories about it ever since. They say it’s the body of a boy who got separated from his father when they went out to check their traplines. For days, he wandered, trying to keep warm at night by burrowing under the snow.

“One morning, he didn’t wake up. When spring came and the snow melted, there he was, asleep in the middle of the lake. Legend has it that he lies there waiting for his father to find him and take him home.”

The old man nodded as the woman talked. When she finished, he spoke again.

"True enough. But he wakes up sometimes."

"Oh, Seth. That's just a very old, very silly story," the woman said kindly.

Turning back to the driver, she continued, "There are some who say that the boy wakes up every now and then, just before something terrible is about to happen. They say he guards these hills, making sure no one comes to grief the way he did."

Another man pushed his way to the front of the crowd.

"Hogwash," he snorted. "I've lived here nearly as long as Seth and I don't believe a word of it. It's all rubbish."

He turned to face Seth and the woman.

"Why don't you tell them the one about how he wakes up every spring and pushes chunks of ice around on the lake like toy boats?" he asked sarcastically. "They say he's playing with them."

"Or how about the one that has him hanging around the animals — bears, badgers, groundhogs and the like. That's supposed to be why they wake up in spring — to play with him. Now that's a good one, don't you think?"

The crowd began to grow restless, laughing when a young man pointed at Seth and gestured that he was out of his mind.

"You're right there, fella," the man snickered.