

## ROCKET MAN

by

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"...Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Two, One. LIFT OFF! We have lift off of the Space Shuttle Discovery." The roar of the three shuttle main engines and the two solid rocket motors made him think of the cold winter nights in hobo camps, waiting for the powerful locomotives to slow down enough for him to hop a freight. He had come a long ways from those camps, and all the years of simulations finally were paying off. "Is this thing going to blow? What is causing my side to feel as though a mule kicked me?"

He opened his eyes in time to see the billy club swinging towards him again, and he jerked away, but not soon enough. This time the club caught him on the thigh. Screaming in pain, he tried crawling towards the door of the boxcar, as the sadistic eyes of the railroad bull conveyed the contempt of those who hold jobs have towards those who do not. "Get off of my train, you filthy bum," echoed in his ears, just as the billy club glanced off of his left shoulder. Fortunately, the train was still in the yard, and he managed to escape through the partially open door, just a moment before the bull swung the billy club again. Dreams of flying in the shuttle quickly forgotten, he limped as fast as he could move into the shadows of another train.

There was a time in his life he used to remark that his education was incomplete, because although he had travelled extensively, he had never hopped a freight and ridden in a boxcar. By now, the red had long been licked off that lollipop. By changing his lifestyle, he had certainly enhanced his education. Now, he just wished for a place he could call his own.

In years past, he enjoyed looking at the constellation of Orion on cold, clear nights. He would look through binoculars at the Orion Nebula, and then go back into the house and warm up in front of the fireplace with a good cup of hot chocolate. Now, shivering near the massive wheels of an idling diesel locomotive, and stealing what little heat he could absorb, the bright stars in Orion's belt now only served as a reminder of the long, cold hours ahead, and what he had lost along the way.

Moving twice more to avoid any more beatings, he found refuge behind a garbage dumpster. A million hours of cold later, he woke up with the sun in his eyes. Even though the mission had been filled last night, he knew they would offer him last night's left over coffee, bitter but hot. Sometimes, they had toast or cornflakes. This town was no different than the other thousand, and he knew if he stayed here a few more days, the good church ladies would help serve the turkey to him and his kind, then go home to their own lavish Christmas dinners, feeling good about having helped the homeless.

Walking to the mission, he smiled when his hand touched his toothbrush in the pocket of his dirty overcoat. No matter what each day might bring, he took pride in brushing his teeth everyday. This mission looked as if it had showers. He expected a superior attitude from the people who worked at the mission. He also guessed that if the lady behind the counter had finished high school, and didn't have a couple of kids to support because her husband had run off with another woman, she probably wouldn't be working here. Still, he was unprepared for her nastiness. Only the hunger pains in his stomach humbled him enough to endure the wrath of her bitterness from a life that hadn't quite lived up to her teenage dreams. He thought, "She has probably never had the pleasure of watching dolphins play or rainbows in the forest".

So he said simply, "Lady, I don't know why you are so angry. I haven't done anything to you. When your troubles are more than you can handle, the best thing you can do is Pray

and ask Jesus to help lighten your load. It works." She looked at him strangely, wiped a tear away, and said softly, "I'm sorry. I took my frustrations out on you, because I don't know how I'm going to have enough money to buy Christmas presents for my kids. To make matters worse, they are asking when they can see their grandmother. She lives here in town, but we haven't spoken to each other for six months, because we had a fight over something stupid. Enough about my troubles. You look like you need something to eat. The dining room is down the hall, and the showers are to your right." Her smile made him think of his daughter, whom he had not seen in five years.

Much to his surprise, the coffee was fresh, and the breakfast wasn't bad. He shaved his gray stubble with the rusted razor blade he carried with him, always wrapped in a piece of newspaper. He inspected his wounds and decided the bruises would outlast his pain. The hot shower helped ooze the pain away, and gave him the opportunity to rinse his clothes. As bad as it smelled, he didn't dare wash his overcoat, because he would need it dry when he went back outside. He figured he could find someplace warm to hide long enough for his clothes to dry while he was wearing them.

For some reason, the mission closed from 9 AM until 4 PM, so that meant hitting the streets again. Just as he was walking out, he heard, "Hey, Rocket Man!" Turning around, he saw an old Black man with the widest grin. Using the push broom as a crutch, Jack Daniels hobbled over to him. They embraced each other like long lost brothers. It had been a couple of years since they had seen each other. Their bond was as strong as combat veterans, strengthened from the glue of common survival under adverse conditions.

Jack Daniels really wasn't his name, but he always said that when he became rich, that's what he would drink. The name stuck. Always Jack Daniels, not Jack. Every man has his story, and sometimes, the nicknames fit. Jack Daniels was the man who saved him from drowning in a rain filled gutter, after the NASA layoffs and his divorce, and the slide downhill that followed. Appropriately, Jack Daniels dubbed him 'Rocket Man'. From Jack Daniels he learned the ways of the streets; in return he taught Jack Daniels how to read while they shared bottles of Thunderbird over warm air ducts in city sidewalks. Once, they worked together on a construction crew, pouring concrete on the patio deck of a seafront restaurant while the patrons ate their blackened redfish, drank imported beers and wines, and pretended not to notice them.

Jack Daniels lived at the mission, but there was only room for one janitor. But his street smarts had not diminished; he showed the Rocket Man the little cubbyhole, which lead to the basement of the public library, and then hobbled off to sweep the mission floor.

Even though he didn't smoke anymore, the Rocket Man dug out his faded Apollo 11 cigarette lighter to use as a flashlight. Scouting around, he found an abandoned musty storage room. It wasn't big - in fact most of the jail cells, which occasionally kept him off the streets, were larger. But it was warm and dry. Then he discovered a restroom that hadn't been used for years, but still functioned. One dimly lit light bulb worked when he pressed the old push button ON switch. Better yet, there was no sign of rats. In comparison with last night's boxcar, this place seemed like a five star hotel. Why others hadn't discovered this place was beyond him. Five minutes after telling Jack Daniels to save a place for supper, the Rocket Man realized he had just moved into his own new home. Ten minutes later, the lack of proper sleep caught up with him.

Besides a toothbrush and a cigarette lighter, the only other thing the Rocket Man had managed to keep was an old but reliable pocket watch. Waking up to a throbbing pain in his thigh, he looked around in bewilderment at his surroundings. Recalling the events of the past several hours, he was surprised that his watch read 6:44. AM or PM? For the first time in months, he had slept an uninterrupted eight hours. He yearned for a drink. Carefully, he snuck out of the library, and headed back to the mission. Why is it, he mused, that in front of every soup kitchen in the country is a neon sign in the shape of a cross that always has a least one letter not working? A block away, the orange words, JESUS S VES, beckoned him

onward. Missions generally don't allow men to stay more than a few days, but one could go there daily for the soup-de-jour.

Jack Daniels saved him some beef stew. The usual green beans from the back of somebody's kitchen cabinet reminded him of the Christmas food drives back at NASA. Once again, he wished during those times he had given a canned ham, or some chocolate chip cookies. Looking at the dejected faces of the others in the mission dining room, the Rocket Man knew he was seeing mirrored images of himself. As if reading his thoughts, Jack Daniels said, "Come mer, I got something to show ya." A worn mattress drunkenly leaned against the side of the mission's back wall. Grinning that toothless grin, Jack Daniels told how he managed to con the volunteer cook out of the mattress.

Surprised they weren't caught, these two friends sort of carried the mattress on their heads, or at least that's how they started out, back to the library. Fighting as gallantly as Don Quixote in the Windmill War, they finally convinced the mattress it was useless not to surrender to the narrow hideaway entrance. Sagging in defeat, the mattress allowed them to triumphally carry it to the basement storage room.

Their victory called for a celebration! Jack Daniels brought out his half-empty bottle of Thunderbird, and they laughed for several hours as they asked each other, "Remember when...?" Hoboes and bums can have their good days, too. Their talk turned to religion, and the Rocket Man said he had once read in a Houston newspaper about a wino who wrote poetry. While he couldn't remember the poet's name, one thing the poet had written stayed with him: "The day Jesus turned the water into wine is the day He became a friend of mine."

Their mood changed as the wine took its toil. Jack Daniels kept quiet when the Rocket Man lamented about not seeing his daughter. How could he tell her that he was locked up on a Public Intoxication charge on her wedding day? The last time he talked to his ex-wife, she haughtily told him where their daughter and her husband lived. Maybe, someday... Who would ever believe that he used to associate with some of the astronauts?

Although the Rocket Man knew he could not stay in the library forever, he realized that he could probably live there for a while, if he was careful not to be caught. For the first time in several years, he had a place to call home. Living in filth never had been one of his favorite lifestyles. Standing in the corner of the restroom, a dried-up mop and a broom with most of the bristles missing caught his eye. After Jack Daniels departed, and before the library opened, he busied himself by cleaning house.

During the next few days, he would go to the mission for food and companionship, and the lady working there actually smiled when she saw him. Somehow, he knew she still worried about Christmas for her kids. It was tricky to leave the library after it opened without being observed, and still be down at the mission before it closed. He began to shave every other day, and found clean clothes down at the Salvation Army. He remembered in years past turning his head the other way to avoid looking into the eyes of the bell ringers who stood frozen next to the black pots, ringing those annoying bells.

Selling a pint of blood generally was worth twenty-five dollars, but the blood center refused to take his blood, because the sample taken from his finger didn't sink in the test tube. Dejected, he searched the library's newspapers for Help Wanted ads. There was a time that he read Engineering and Technical classified ads to keep abreast of engineering trends, but now he bypassed that section and looked under Temporary Help. Loading Christmas trees at a lot five blocks away looked like something he could do. They only paid minimum wage, but he figured two days at the lot would pay him enough to buy Jack Daniels a real bottle of Jack Daniels for Christmas, and help Barbara, the lady who worked at the mission.

For a man who had grown up devouring any book he could get his hands on, the temptation to sneak up into the library was too great to pass. All the years of only reading newspaper blankets through red eyes dulled by wine had left him in an intellectual void. The

mission was good for food, but he liked the privacy of the library. The library became his office during the afternoon, and his domain during the night, after he finished work at the Christmas tree lot. It is not easy to lose your self-respect; it is even more difficult to find it. He could see that the city funds for the library didn't leave much for new books or good caretakers. During the night, when he was locked in by himself, he decided to pay rent by sweeping and mopping the floors upstairs, dusting the shelves, and emptying the trash. It sure beat being locked up in jail.

Mrs. Perkins, the widowed librarian, began to notice the shabbily dressed man who kept to himself and quietly read Shakespeare, Milton, Greek tragedies and space books. She noticed that the library was being cleaned, and wondered. She also noticed that a couple of nicer toys from the city toy collection box inside the front door were missing. That infuriated her, because she had placed those toys there herself. Nobody knew the library like she did, so she decided to hide in the basement at a place where the front stairs could be observed, to see if she could catch the thief. She hated to go in the basement - it was always so creepy. But nobody was going to steal toys from her library and get away with it! Especially on Christmas Eve.

In all of her years working there, she had never seen the basement clean. Who was the mysterious cleaner? Even the antique bathroom, which was there when she was young, didn't have the rank odor it used to. She almost had forgotten why she was in the basement, when she spotted the toys, a spaceship and a doll, each with a red bow. Now, she was even more puzzled. She didn't know whether or not to call the police, but it intrigued her that these toys were probably taken by the same person cleaning the library. To whom were the toys going?

She reasoned that there was only one outside place the thief could enter and leave without much chance of detection. By standing in the dark near an upstairs corner window, she could observe anybody who might cross the alley leading to that entrance. She stood at the slightly open window thirty minutes before she detected footsteps. Her heart jumped in fear, and then relaxed when she recognized the shabbily dressed old man. Where was he going?

Grabbing her coat, she almost slipped down the stairs in her hurry to follow that old man. None of the late shoppers gave this older guy a second glance as he carried toys wrapped in red ribbons. He was just somebody's grandfather. But why was he walking up the mission steps? Even on Christmas Eve, children were not allowed in the mission. She knew, because her daughter worked there. Tears ran down her cheek, her heart heavy. They had not spoken for several months, due to a major argument. She had bought gifts for her grandchildren, but hadn't figured out how to bridge the gap.

Much to her joy, she saw a glimpse of her daughter when the old man opened the door. Quickening her step, she crossed the street near the town's Nativity scene, and risked peaking through the window of the mission door. An old Black man was shaking hands with the old man, and her daughter was hugging him. She knew the spaceship was for her grandson, and the doll for her granddaughter. Holding her hands up to the window for a better look, the door suddenly opened, and her daughter looked up in astonishment. With tears in her eyes, her arms opened, she said quietly, "Mother."

Jack Daniels, still grinning and clinking his bottle, left the room for a few minutes, ostentatiously to retrieve the Christmas tree, which the Rocket Man was given at the tree lot. The two of them had previously decided to give the tree to Barbara and her two kids. Quietly, the Rocket Man shuffled his feet, not wanting to interrupt Barbara and her mother. Looking out the window and lost in thoughts of Christmas Past, he didn't hear Jack Daniels enter the room. Nor did he hear his daughter and son-in-law. But he did hear a baby cry - sort of appropriate for Christmas Eve. Turning around, he saw the grandson he didn't even know he had. "Merry Christmas, Daddy!"

Around Christmas time, the mission gave each of its "customers" one free long distance phone call. Since Jack Daniels didn't have any family of his own, he decided to use his call to locate the Rocket Man's daughter. Somehow, he had the right name and city, and was lucky. So the Rocket Man's daughter flew out to see her father.

Once the shock wore off, introductions were made, and Mrs. Perkins invited everyone to go with her to Christmas Eve services. Barbara said, "We must first go pick up the kids, so they can see their grandmother". As they all walked out into the snow, the Rocket Man's arm hurt because his daughter was holding onto it so tightly. A good hurt, not like the pain caused by a swinging billy club. Travelling the endless highway for five years, he had found contentment when Jack Daniels showed him the library room. Now his daughter was saying something about him living in an empty apartment within her complex. A week ago he was having his side kicked in while sleeping in a boxcar. Orion Nebula shined warm and bright enough to be the Christmas Star.

Somehow, the spirit and magic of Christmas brought together an old hobo who had dreams of going to space, his heart-broken daughter and her family, a Black man who had the name of a bourbon whiskey, an old woman with a guilty conscience, a young desperate mother, and two young children who didn't think they would have any Christmas presents. Indeed, it was a Merry Christmas!