

THRILLING TALES FROM BEYOND THE ETHER

RAYGUN REVIVAL

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Nolan McGarry, Space Hobo

by Chris Mikesell

The doors are halfway shut when the two young punks clamber on board, distracting me from my search of the dozen or so boxes discarded in the corner. I turn when I hear them come over. Under the guise of nodding hello, I look closely at their faces, and reflexively rub my stomach to calm the churning.

Don't get me wrong: while I prefer traveling alone, I like that you never know who you might meet stowing away in a starship's hold. Once you spend time together, though, it's always disappointing. These two I don't need to spend any time with to be disappointed. It's written in their eyes: 150 planets and nowhere to go.

Well, maybe one place, but they're certainly not headed there now.

I grunt a greeting and as a trio we finish ransacking the boxes. More than enough to see us across the system to Terra Centauri. Bottled water. Fruit tabs. SpaceChili.

Time was, not many remember it now, but time was when everything felt more exciting if it had the word Space before it. Things like SpaceLights (fluorescents as bright as the sun) or SpaceNectar ("Martian" Mango Madness, Sublime "Saturn" Strawberry, Rockin' "Rigel-7" RhubarBanana). Eventually, instead of conveying all things exotic, the word became the pet of advertisers with garbage hardly worth selling: the Walker SpacePen, for instance (not the writes-upside-down pen from the Moon Shots a century ago, those are still great; the Walker was just an ordinary pen with Space prominently displayed on the packaging).

Personally, I like the title Space Hobo. I may

not be worth much, and I'm far from exotic, but I've made peace with that. These two, though, Cargo-Riders or Freightboys—call 'em what you like, anything but Drifters—they can keep their new titles; I've been a Space Hobo going on thirty years. Only other thing people sometimes call me is "Santa" or "Moses," on account of the beard (not yet fifty and it's already gone white). No one's called me Nolan McGarry since I left home.

Naturally, this time of year, my traveling companions call me Santa.

It's four days out and I still don't know their names. Don't care to. Red and Blondie I've called them the few times I've addressed them directly, and they've taken to calling each other that, too. Or maybe those really are their names.

It's our final night and I'm sitting across the plasma firepit from them, scooping chili out of the can with my fingers. I reposition my heat-recirculating blanket beneath me where the chill of the triple-hulled metal floor stings my legs. I glance over at the corner of the room where I've been sleeping, far from Red and Blondie, far from the firepit, and shiver. It's coming up on Lights Out; we'll do The Exchange soon.

Like any occupation—that is, that which keeps you occupied—the life of people like me is filled with Traditions. Only forty-five years folks have been doing this, but they're still Traditions with a capital T.

The Exchange is one of them. Campfire tales around a green plasma glow. The stories change with the season: the farthest you've been from Earth in August (the month by whoever's reckoning of the Solar Calendar

seems most lucid); where and how you learned a special talent in May. December is "The Best Gift I Ever Received." Smokesticks are divvied up afterward. (In March it's socks—no one remembers why—but it's best if you've safeguarded a clean pair of your own so you're not stuck with someone else's dirties.)

While we left most of the notions of religion behind when we took to the stars, the Golden Rule's still with us. Or maybe it's just plain Karma. If your brother's worse off than you, help him out. The shipping companies learned that the hard way early on when they tried kicking Space Hoboes out of empty cargo units or released the MagLoc bolts on the freight doors mid-trip. Bad things started happening: wormholes, raiding parties, crews up and disappearing. Now we're a token of good luck, like the albatross from the ancient poem. Even we know better than to let harm come to one of our own, and the only Drifters now are those who lose hope and short out the MagLocs themselves. Smokesticks these boys don't need, but maybe they'll come out of The Exchange with what they do.

Maybe.

The pair across from me are whispering, foreheads almost touching. When you've been at this as long as me—and there's not many who have—you grow familiar with the habits of the young. Familiar, perhaps, because you can still remember when you did the same. I don't need to hear their stories to know they're going to shine me on. Drew four aces and remembered to play your bluffer's tell instead of wetting your pants. The captain of a Neptune-class ship like Orion's Belt or the New Titan offered you luxury accommodations on a trip back to Earth. The old geezer at last year's Christmas Exchange passed around Primonantays.

But things like that never happen. Not when you're tramping. If the captain leaves half a crate of limes in the hold, now that's something to grow misty over.

So I know these two are negotiating who gets to tell which story. I peg Red, who's already missing a couple teeth, will go with at least an inside straight. Blondie: a nine-day trip to Capricorn-Prime with passionate Freightgirls, most likely. He's still got looks enough to make it plausible.

"Santa, will you start us out?" Red asks.

I take a drink of water to clear the chili out of my throat. "Last'll do me."

When you don't plan on bluffing it always pays to go last.

Blondie begins with "I never thought it would happen to me, but—" and it's no problem nodding and hooting in the right places. Only a three-day planet hop, though; the boy has self-esteem issues.

Red doesn't. He draws four cards to a royal flush and postpones the final ace until the second discard just to build suspense. He tells the story well, I'll give him that, but champagne is still only so much Korzo's SpaceWine. (Korzo's is fine by me, but don't dress it up as something it's not.)

The lights above us wash over blue as Red waxes nostalgic about his imaginary six thousand in chips. Five minutes to tell my story before the lights go out and the fire dies down to gas-jet embers.

A minute-ten more than I really need.

"It was Christmas," I begin, "thirty-two years ago. I was fourteen, living in Colony-4 on Terra Centauri. Me and my dad."

I stare at the fire, count to five. "Me and my dad."

Out of the corner of my eye I catch the boys nodding.

"We'd been there three years—came across with the first seeding ships. Dad knew hydroponics, and while the first two colony domes would always be out of our reach, Dad

said Col-4 was only temporary. Not that it was a bad place. The climate was usually under control and the water was mostly fresh.

"But this Christmas..." One two three four five "...this Christmas the hoverbike I expected turned out to be used coveralls and my dad's old hydroponics texts. 'Be good to spend more time together, son.'"

"'Uh huh,'" I said. "'What's next?'"

I wipe a tear off my cheek with the meat of my palm. (Third time I've brought myself to tell this story; you'd think I'd be used to it by now.) A snuffle across the fire assures me I'm not alone in feeling homesick.

"Course that's not the end of the story. It gets better. After a couple more non-hoverbike gifts and a two-minute vidcall to my grandparents back on Earth, Dad said he had to get something from the storage shed."

On the other side of the fire the boys are grinning expectantly.

"He was forever in coming back. I went out to see if he'd been hurt or was going to jump out with the hoverbike, but he wasn't there. Inside the shed were his tools, some H-pon equipment...and one more thing—"

"What?" gasps Blondie.

"My independence. Best gift a dad could give a kid."

Sniffles. Choked sobs. Playing a harmonica should be so easy.

"My independence," I repeat as the lights dim and I offer the boys a couple smokesticks. They refuse.

"My folks," Blondie says, "I haven't seen them in almost a year."

Red doesn't say anything, but he twists at the ring on his left hand.

"What're you boys riding freight for?" I

offer the sticks again.

They take them, but don't light up or answer my question. Red mumbles a goodnight before the two disappear into their blankets.

I stand and watch over them a minute, watch the uneven rise and fall of their breathing patterns, listen to their muffled sobs as the lights strobe out and the fire dies. Why does causing them sorrow make me feel so proud? Ashamed, I retreat to my sleeping area.

As I settle in, a muffled sob escapes from my own pile of blankets. For the boys. For myself.

When we land in Terra Centauri tomorrow I expect Galactic Bell will make out nicely with a couple collect vidcalls. Will Red and Blondie's families welcome them home with open arms? If ever they had a chance it doesn't get better than this time of year.

Me? I'll hold my annual vigil outside the shed if it's still there. Maybe Dad finally found what it was he went out to get. Perhaps he'll know where to find a son who'd be glad to spend time with him. Haven't run into him on any of my journeys, so maybe he's still out looking. Maybe he's dead. But I've got hope.

Red and Blondie, they've got what it takes to make it through one more night, I think. One of the piles of blankets by the firepit has begun to snore. But I'll sleep under the MagLoc junction box just to be safe.



CHRIS MIKESELL

In November 2004, Chris Mikesell scribbled "I am a writer" on an index card as an exercise for National Novel Writing Month. Today, he's still wrestling with the manuscript he completed that month. But the index card trick seems to have worked.

*He garnered his first publication credit at the end of 2005 with a submission to **The Wittenburg Door**. His '06 short fiction and poetry credits include **Infuze Magazine**; **Flashing in the Gutters**; **Dragons, Knights, and Angels Magazine**; **Flashes of Speculation**; and another piece at **The Wittenburg Door**. He is one of several writers journaling as **Wilbur Hucks** at novelist **Brandilyn Collins'** character blog, **Scenes & Beans**.*

He is considering writing "I believe I am a writer" next time he opens a pack of 3x5 cards.

He lives near Eugene, Oregon, with his wife and their son. His blog is located at <http://mikesell.blogspot.com>.