

Rocket Man

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Dedication

*For Clay, Callie, Careen, and Kitty
My Stars.*

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Ernest Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park for giving me a key to a very old house. It's not everyday one gets to write in the birthplace of Ernest Hemingway. The view has been amazing.

W.E.H.

July 2008

“I am not to be denied...”

–Walt Whitman

Also by William Elliott Hazelgrove

Ripples
Tobacco Sticks
Mica Highways

Preflight

My father is a traveling salesman, that peculiar brand of Willy Loman that actually loves the natural flight of American selling. When I was a boy, I thought of him as a man who appeared on Fridays when we had a steak and ice cream for dessert. After dinner, my father would watch whatever football game was on television and fall asleep with his mouth open, tie loosened, hand over his brow as if he had just finished one hell of a race. I usually waited until he woke to tell him of my latest achievement and show him my banana bike and collection of baseball cards. But I had a brother who demanded his small time with him also, so when my time came, it was usually just before he ran for his car, briefcase in hand, and waved away another week.

But there was one time I remember where I had him all to myself. For Christmas, my parents had given me an Estes Rocket Set. It was an amazing toy with a launcher, rocket engines, and the giant Saturn Five Rocket that had conquered the moon a decade before. I stayed up late gluing the white fuselage together, packing the parachute, and inserting the four D engines. The day after Christmas, my father and I walked to a field to launch my rocket. We walked through the tall weeds painted orange by the low sun. He kept his hands in his pockets while I carried the rocket and the launcher packed with batteries to fire the rocket. We crunched through frozen mud until we reached the middle of the field. Twilight simmered beyond the big pines and thin blue snow dusted the ground. I put the launcher down and stretched the wires to the

control pad. My Saturn Five rocket was a beast. It took four D engines with two parachutes and four wadded sheets to keep the ejection charge from burning the chute up.

“Looks like we are launching Apollo 11,” my father murmured while I threaded the Saturn Five onto the launch wire.

I connected the igniter wires to the four D engines. All four engines had to ignite or my Saturn Five would go off at a crazy angle and heave into the ground. I checked the igniters and made sure they were shoved far up into the engines. My father stamped his feet and kept his hands in his pockets.

“You think this thing will go, boy?”

I looked at the man smoking a Pall Mall, his long Brooks Brothers coat waving.

“Think so.”

“So this is what you do all week while I’m gone, boy?”

“Yup.”

My father smoked without his hands.

“Well, hurry up, boy. It’s going to be dark soon.”

I turned and walked back to the launch control and inserted the key. The light glowed ready.

“You might move back, Dad.”

He looked over and snuffed the cigarette out, crunching through the frozen mud. He was already looking at the distant cars on the highway, thinking about his next appointment, gassing up, pointing that company car back to the highway. He turned back and nodded to me.

“Well, blast it off, boy.”

I stared at my Saturn Five, a colossus of white and black with USA going up the side in red letters. I began to count down.

“Five, four, three, two, one ...”

I pressed the button on my launcher as the ready light flickered out. There was the slight hiss of the sulfur igniters, and for a moment the rocket didn't move. Then the four D engines caught fire, and whoosh! The fire bent out and burned the weeds below the launcher and suddenly the Saturn Five was gone. A fiery tail burned high up in the cold sky as the rocket leaned over slightly and left a white vapor trail across the early stars.

"Jesus Christ!"

My father continued staring up while I stamped out the weed fire. The ejection charge fired and the chutes blossomed, but I could see the Saturn Five had gone too high for the wind and the time of day. It was getting dark, and that rocket was sailing fast into the west, a white satellite against a darkening blue palate.

"I'll be goddamned," he muttered, shaking his head. "Boy, that sonofabitch really flew."

I put my hand up and saw the Saturn Five drifting away; a gold colossus hanging by four parachutes.

"Aren't you going after it, boy?"

I shook my head solemnly.

"No, it's gone," I murmured, watching the rocket drift past the field. "There's too much wind."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes."

My father kept his neck craned to the sky, then put his hands on my shoulders. That's what I remember. I think it was the only time we were really together, watching that rocket disappear into the coal sky.

1

T-6

...and counting

Sunday

HAIR of the dog.

The vodka is fighting the tomato juice, but it does the trick, and I mitigate the vagaries of selling popcorn at the Kane County Fair with ten screaming Cub Scouts, Bloody Mary firmly in hand, shades firmly affixed. The margaritas from the night before are a headache I'd rather be doing without, but osmosis and a little old-fashioned self medicating has gotten me to the point where I can drive Cub Scouts and be the charming father of two, husband of one. But I have to make a decision.

We are constantly presented with rules that we can either choose to follow or break. Does one go through the unmanned toll? Does one pay for the case of water in the bottom of the shopping cart that no one sees? They are small, middle class rules, but rules all the same. My choice is simple. Do I take the time to hang a big looping U-turn and return to the highway for the Dairy Queen I missed ... or do I cut into the McDonald's parking lot and plow across an excavated field of old pipes and

earth movers, past the surveyor posts flapping like markers of the road not taken?

These are the choices of our lives now. The big choices are mostly behind us by middle age, and we are reduced to schoolboys trying to whisper when the teacher's back is turned.

What the hell.

"Dale ...Dale, *what are you doing*," Brad Jones of Pack 490 Boy Scouts of America (BSA) demands while hanging on to the handrail of my white Yukon urban assault vehicle.

I look over at Brad in his camouflage green BSA hat, aviation sunglasses from 1975, and scout leader shirt tattooed with badges and ribbons like something General McArthur had worn. His cell phone and pager are clipped firmly to more drab olive green, his outfit finished out with knee-high socks also in the color of combat regalia. He is the scout leader alarmed, his Chicago accent giving way to a more high-pitched tenor, speaking as the leader of the pack, but also as a man who realizes he has suddenly lost control. His day up to now has the tenor of all scout functions—monotony on par with a kid's show, sprinkled with flares of patriarchal conformity. This is the way Brad likes it. He *likes* control and conformity, and he *loves* uniforms. Give the man a gymnasium and a microphone and captive parents and he becomes *Aerosmith*—the neo-Nazi of the last sanctioned paramilitary organization in America—the Boy Scouts.

A finger jousts the air between us.

"*Dale, you can't do this!*"

I have turned my warlord Yukon XL into the vacant field between McDonald's and Dairy Queen, veering around a drainage culvert, avoiding a berm, crushing a few neon orange surveyor posts. From the recesses of this wagon on the

rampage comes the dulcet tone of my wife. She is occupying the third seat along with a rafter of Cub Scouts, Tiger Scouts, and a desultory Boy Scout who has suddenly perked up at the prospect of a little off-road four-wheeling. That would be Brad Jones, Jr. who is headed for an Eagle Scout badge, and in unguarded moments, I can see he thinks his father is as big a geek as I do.

“Dale ... *what are you doing?*”

This is the question of the day really. I glance into the dim recesses of my cavernous SUV and can see lovely blond hair in a sea of blue Cub Scout hats. *What am I doing?* I have made a choice outside the purview of the modern father. “Dad” would not do such a thing, although I can imagine my own father plowing his dusty Buick across a field in Mississippi. But those were different times. Conformity was still just a word to men who had only four channels, and those were grainy at best—mass culture was yet to do its collective tap dance on our consciousness. But a modern man with a Blackberry and an iPod and a thousand-dollar bicycle would not *knowingly* break the law unless he was a criminal. I know I am alone in my choice to bash through barriers and take the shortest distance between two points.

The noise level in our caravan has reached something resembling an airplane going into a nosedive. The scouts are being jostled and have just realized something really cool and different is going on outside the purview of the grab-ass melodrama that is their everyday existence in the far west suburb of Charleston, Illinois. Kids are still open to a good time; it is the adults who have become a drag. Our move to the land of the moral majority has put me many times in sympathy with the Lilliputians who skirt the radar screen of overgrown men and women. I am in sympathy with these ten-year-olds

who just want to have fun, because / just want to have fun, and it is my brethren that seem intent on stopping anyone from having a good time

“Dale! *What are you doing?*”

I look into the mirror of our command vehicle.

“Just taking a shortcut, honey,” I shout above the squeals of scouts in motion, enjoying the massive amount of sheer power a man possesses when imprisoning people in a large truck.

“Dale, this is *illegal*, and you are setting a bad example for the boys,” Brad Jones warns while I skirt a large drainage culvert and several nasty-looking steel pipes sticking out of the ground.

I glance at Brad and gesture to the moonscape we are bouncing over like two men in a pogo contest.

“Calm down, Brad, calm thyself,” I tell the leader of Pack 490. “You are always talking about how we have to teach the boys to be prepared and how we have to learn to think creatively in the wilderness and deal with the unexpected. Well,” I continue, motioning to the excavated plain, “here is the unexpected.”

Brad Jones turns to me, his olive skin turning darker. This is not something that a man who clips a cell phone, a radio pager, and a large keychain to his belt every day envisions as a possibility. I imagine Brad standing in front of his bathroom mirror with the coffee-induced circles less prominent under the brim of his BSA hat. His Chicago accent falls away as he readies himself for the pack meeting in the gymnasium, enjoying Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame with an hour and a half of droning announcements to a captive audience of parents. I know Brad loves wearing the Scout uniform the way a senior citizen likes wearing a crossing belt. A sense of

purpose descends over one Brad Jones when the olive drab covers his body and the 490 tattoos his shoulder—something being the manager of Best Buy does not provide.

“*Dale!* Driving across private property does not teach *leadership skills*,” Brad hisses, holding on as the front left tire finds a hidden chuckhole, eliciting howls of delight from our young protégées.

“Well now, Brad, this may not be the same as blazing a trail through the boundary waters, but we are men who are confronted with modern problems, and our boys could well find themselves faced with this very same choice one day,” I point out, swerving around a sewer grate.

Brad stares at me as if I had just asked him to go into a gay bar. He is from Chicago and has equated escaping the city with material success and carries none of my suburban angst. He is never happier than in heelless slippers, grilling burgers on his deck, looking out at fifty other homes just like his. Brad Jones has made it in the immigrant sense and has left the squalor of dark brown stones and strange accents and landed in the cradle of the suburban middle class. I know we are different men, but still I try and enlighten Brad just the same.

“*What choice*,” he sputters, turning bright red.

“Whether or not to take the road less traveled,” I point out. “I could have turned around in the parking lot and reentered the highway, but instead I opted to take the road less traveled—to blaze my *own* trail, as we all must do.”

Brad stares at me as if I have just told him the world is flat. My philosophy of the writer-adventurer finds no port in the Jones sea, and I see now we are back in the Westside neighborhood, and Brad and his dad, in their sleeveless T-shirts, are shaking their heads on the stoop, saying, “That guy is a fricking whack job.”

Assistant Scout Master Jones then frowns, shaking his head.

“I don’t think four-wheeling is one of the merit badges our scouts should be working toward,” he says with more sarcasm than I thought he was capable of.

“You got me there, Brad,” I nod, holding my drink aloft, which Brad is now scrutinizing like a cop. “But I am *problem solving* aren’t I? I mean, I could have gone back into traffic and taken all that time waiting to turn into the Dairy Queen. Instead I took the shortest distance between two points,” I point out again, watching parents and kids abandoning picnic tables on the edge of the field.

I imagine to them I look fairly menacing, this large white whale of a truck plowing across this dusty sea of prairie grass and excavator glory, lunging toward the middle class families enjoying a little ice cream on one of the last warm days in October. Brad Jones now has the look of a librarian who just caught some boys jacking off in the bathroom. His eyes have narrowed and the clipboards and scouting manuals in his lap give him moral support as he levels his charge.

“I know that’s not *tomato juice*, Dale,” he informs me, leaning across the space in our cockpit as I wheel past two men in orange surveyor jackets, looking up at Moby Dick’s passage. “I can smell the *alcohol*,” he hisses like a woman, all the outrage of a hijacked Assistant Scout Master in transit making his voice unsteady.

It is true. I did lace the V8 with some Smirnoff at the last minute. The party around our marble bar on the patio was dried up salsa and obelisks of salted rims that had dashed many a margarita the night before. The thunder that is tequila felt like cracked ice in my frontal lobe, and so I employed the homegrown remedy of lessening the departing alcohol with

just a splash of vodka. The cure had worked, and my headache had mostly left, leaving only the short temper of a hangover to be mitigated. Little did I know I would share a ride with the temperance league. It was just a splash, after all.

“Brad ... come on,” I say, feeling the bite of my hangover in the form of this pestering neo-Nazi. “Just a little hair of the dog, buddy.”

I am sure Brad Jones would have made a great Brown Shirt in Hitler’s legions, informing others how their shirts weren’t tucked in, their swastikas sewn on in the wrong spots. His fellow Nazis then would groan as Brad took the podium and proclaimed in fine German, “Now, just a few procedural announcements before the Fuhrer comes on.” Then Brad would drone on for a good thirty minutes about the Nazi campout, the Nazi popcorn drive, the Nazi Merit Badge awards that would go for another thirty minutes. Soon, the entire SA would suspect that Brad actually *liked* all the mind-numbing procedural protocol, and they would begin to plot to shoot him in the back when they reached the Russian front.

But Brad’s observations on my habits, my choices, my very being are all for naught. I have just bumped over the curb barriers and left the desert of our conquering. Dairy Queen families have clustered around one lone picnic table, outraged fathers in shorts with fat calves and black socks, shaking their heads at the audacity of someone crossing the Mohave desert. They said it couldn’t be done, but I say, “*Acaba!*” I feel the elation of Lawrence of Arabia when he cleared the desert and snuck up on the Turks. It is not so much that I crossed the field to Dairy Queen with my two-ton vehicle, but that I have *broken* a rule in the land of rules. So I raise my drink.

“To your health, buddy. We did it.”

I wheel across the parking lot in a victory arc and pull into

an open spot. The high of selling popcorn at the Kane County Fair has now been lost on Brad Jones, along with his gratitude for giving him and his popcorn salesmen a ride. He fumes silently, scribbling on a clipboard. I feel like I am a boy again and a teacher is writing me up for talking in class, spitting out the window, or four-wheeling to the Dairy Queen.

“I’m going to have to report this to the council, Dale.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Does this mean I’m off the hook on Rocket Day?”

There is now silence in my Scout bus, and I know the ears of one Wendy Francis Hammer has zeroed in on the conversation.

“I think we will have to review the *entire* situation,” Brad says ominously, writing something on his clipboard that I’m sure says something like, *Said subject did in fact knowing and with forethought drive across an open field to the Dairy Queen with scouts in vehicle under the influence of alcohol. Faithfully submitted, Brad Jones, Assistant Scout Master 490, BSA.*

I shrug. I have always lost with men like Brad. Sooner or later they know there is a spy in the organization.

“Do what you have to do Brad.”

“I will,” Assistant Scoutmaster Jones responds, clicking his BSA pen.