

The Rocking Woman
A Christmas Tale
By
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“Stop,” Sarah screamed, “red light!”

The brakes squealed as Frank stomped on the pedal. The Honda Civic skidded to an abrupt stop, front end in the crosswalk, just short of the intersection. Frank and Sarah both lurched forward. They slammed back against their seats. A horn blared from behind. But luckily, the car following had kept its distance and avoided rear-ending them.

“Frank,” Sarah cried. “Pay attention. It’s Christmas Eve. An accident is the last thing we need.”

Frank took a deep, calming breath. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

But rather than looking at his wife or at the light to see if it had turned green yet, his gaze locked onto the petite woman who stood on the corner

across the intersection, catty-corner to them. A well-lit 7-Eleven and its parking lot of cars and people served as her backdrop. The woman herself was bundled into what appeared to be three layers of clothing—a jacket over a hooded sweatshirt, which was over a sweater. The hood on the sweatshirt was pulled tight over her head and face. She wore a scarf across her nose and mouth, and—even though it was dusk—large sunglasses covered her eyes. In fact, the only part of her face exposed was the dark skin of her freckled cheeks. To top things off, she wore an Oakland Raiders baseball cap over the hood.

This all seemed very bizarre to Frank because even though it was December, the San Jose evening was not cold but rather unseasonably warm. Her choice of clothes and sunglasses, however, were not the strangest things about her but rather the way she continuously rocked. With feet firmly planted in place, the woman rocked forward and backward—not side to side—and at times, she rocked so hard, she seemed as if she were going to fall either on her back or on her face, depending on which way she was heading at the time.

And this wasn't the first time Frank—or Sarah for that matter—had seen this rocking woman on this very corner. They had seen her many times, even late into the night. And Frank had heard stories about her too.

“You almost ran that red light because of *her*, didn't you?” Sarah asked, indicating the rocking woman. She didn't wait for an answer; she already knew it. “You just can't stop obsessing over her, can you?”

“I'm sorry, honey,” Frank mumbled. He shrugged. “She's out there all the time, all hours of the night ... rocking. I can't help wondering ... I mean

... I've recently heard stories ... gossip, really ... but I can't help wondering what exactly her story is, what she's doing, why she rocks."

Sarah sighed. "I don't understand why she's out there for hours on end either, but I think the poor thing is bored to death, waiting for someone to pick her up to take her to work ... or maybe back home. The rocking is probably just a compulsion."

Mesmerized by the woman's rocking motion, Frank mumbled, "From what I've heard, she *is* waiting for someone or *something* to pick her up alright ... to take her *back* home."

Sarah snorted. "Then you already know the rather simple answer to her mystery," she said, apparently missing the odd reference to the word *something* in Frank's explanation. "At least you know why she's waiting, if not the reason for the rocking," she continued. "But still you wonder and obsess." She shook her head. "I'll never understand you, sweetie."

"It's *what* I've heard she's waiting for that's got me ... *obsessed*."

Sarah's brow furrowed. Now the peculiar word choices of *something* and *what* registered. "*What* she's waiting for? Don't you mean *who*?"

"I guess whether it's *who* or *what* ... *someone* or *something* ... depends on your perspective."

Sarah eyed her husband with a skeptical stare. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll just laugh."

Sarah sighed. "Tell me. You know you're going to anyway ... eventually. Don't make me drag it out of you."

Now Frank sighed. Sarah was right. Eventually he'd relent and tell her

anyway; he might as well just get it over with. He cleared his throat. “I heard that she thinks she’s an *alien* from another planet,” he muttered. “That she thinks she’s here to find out about *us* ... humans, that is ... and life on Earth,” he continued, unable to stop himself now. “That she comes out here almost every night, waiting for her ... *people* ... to come for her and take her back home.”

Sarah broke up, laughing so hard she choked on her own saliva.

A car horn blared behind them.

Sarah looked up then smacked Frank on the arm. Through her choking laugh, she said, “Green light, crazy man.”

Frank stepped on the gas. “I don’t know why I tell you anything,” he complained.

“Aliens,” Sarah cackled, coughing and laughing all at once, eyes tearing. “That’s so you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Aliens,” Sarah cackled again. “Aliens ... and you’re dead serious.”

Frank smiled in spite of himself. “Enough ... I’m a big dork, okay!”

They both had a good laugh as they drove home to celebrate Christmas Eve with their family.

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Josie Sofu rocked forward and backward, the rhythm of her movement keeping time with a tune playing through her head—a tune she knew the pathetic humans around her couldn’t begin to comprehend. In fact, the rocking motion itself—along with the tune in her head being telepathically transmitted—served as a message, a signal to her people that

she was ready to come home. The problem was she couldn't be sure if her people had a ship within range to receive her signals. Probably not. That would explain why they hadn't yet come to get her even though almost every night for the past year she had come to the agreed upon coordinates, signaling and waiting.

She had been living on Earth now for almost thirty-five years, sent here to collect data on humans and how they lived, what motivated them. Her job also was to determine if this inferior species posed any future threat to her home world and its people. Yeah, Rojab was in another quadrant, light years away, but the Rojabian government couldn't be too careful when it came to planetary security. In fact, she was just one of many sent to recon planets throughout the galaxy. She was just unlucky enough to be assigned to Earth.

The tune in her head raced up and down a scale of notes nonexistent on this pathetic planet, a range so high and alternately so low at times that even if telepaths existed here, they wouldn't be able to comprehend the music and its message. For that reason, she felt relatively safe increasing the telepathic volume to reach out farther into space. And she didn't worry about what the humans thought of her rocking either, for she instinctively knew they would only see her as a harmless loon, if they noticed her at all. Thus, she increased that too, rocking back and forth with such ferocity that she almost lost her balance. But thanks to her superior coordination—a coordination and balance humans didn't possess—she was able to keep her feet. Increasing the visual message along with the audible message her mind sent out doubled her chances of being rescued from the retched planet she'd

come to despise.

She desperately needed to get home, to report to her superiors. For, even though Earth and its inhabitants represented no immediate danger because of their inferior intelligence and technology, they did, however, represent a future danger. What she'd found since being here was that humans are a violent, vicious people who prey on their own species—the stronger, both physically and intellectually, taking advantage of the weaker—and who also wage war over petty differences and land boundaries. If this war-faring, aggressive society ever intellectually evolved enough to make significant advancements in space technology and travel, they could eventually pose a considerable threat to not only Rojab but other peaceful societies throughout the galaxy.

Josie concentrated and focused. She rocked harder. Her people were out there, coming for her. Tonight had to be the night. She felt it in her gut. She knew it both in her head and deep in her heart.

A breeze suddenly turned into a strong wind, as if a helicopter swirled directly overhead, its blades chopping at the air. But there was no helicopter.

Josie stopped rocking. She gasped, trembling with anticipation. All around her time seemed to stand still; people and cars froze in place. The street lights dimmed. The traffic lights blinked red, yellow, and green in what appeared to be random patterns. But she recognized the blinking patterns as a coded message.

She pulled the scarf down, exposing her nose and mouth. “They’re here,” she whispered. “Finally, they’re here.”

The chopping wind ripped at her clothes, blowing the baseball cap off

her head and sending it skittering across the street into the nonmoving traffic. Somehow, Josie kept her feet against the bluster. Looking skyward, she spotted a bright array of red and green lights speeding toward her. Without the sunglasses, she would be blinded by them. With them, however, she could make out the spacecraft that sported the lights. It was definitely Rojabian—narrow but long, with moving parts in front that helped fly and guide the ship. Music from the approaching spacecraft filled the air, answering the tune she had played in her own head for the last year to help call them there. Soon the craft hovered overhead. It aimed a white-hot spotlight directly at her. Now Josie had to look away and cover her eyes; even the sunglasses were no match for this otherworldly light. The music was now deafening, as well.

Blind and deaf, wind still swirling about her, she found herself being lifted off the ground by an invisible force. Higher and higher, this invisible force pulled her into the air, and even as her body soared toward the waiting craft, toward a reunion with her people, her heart soared, as well. A smile spread across her face. She lifted her arms as if ready to embrace the ship itself. For the first time in years, she felt joy, she felt free.

A door underneath the ship slid open as she approached. Seconds later, the door closed again under her, and she found herself entombed in darkness, ears buzzing from the sudden and complete silence; she needed to reorient her eyes and ears from the blinding light and deafening music to the polar opposites of blanketing darkness and smothering quiet. She stood, feet planted firmly to the hard floor, concentrating on keeping her balance after being airborne. She imagined the wobbly feeling the same as sailors

suddenly being on land after months at sea.

In nervous anticipation of what was to come, she panted, breath escaping in frosty plumes. Even through the three layers of clothes she wore, the frigid air within the ship sent goose bumps running rampant across her skin. Soon, both to warm herself and to calm her frayed nerves, she began to rock, much like she had for the past year outside the 7-Eleven.

She also concentrated on sending out her thoughts, not in alien musical notes this time though, but in words—Rojabian.

The telepathic message that came back to her, however, commanded that she actually speak ... and in English no less.

Josie stopped rocking. “Why?” she asked, longing to again converse in her native tongue after so long, whether it be telepathically or verbally.

No answer came. Instead, large doors just ahead began to slide open, a metallic, heavy sound accompanying the movement. A bright light peeked out of the widening crack between the doors until finally those sounds died and the doors stood wide. Three small figures advanced out of the backdrop of the blinding light. Even still wearing sunglasses, Josie had to squint hard and look away.

“Why have you sent for us?” one Rojabian asked, voice high and squeaky but authoritative.

“To come home,” Josie answered. “I’ve fulfilled my mission.” She paused, gulping hard. “Haven’t I?”

Silence followed. Except for the pounding in her own ears, Josie heard nothing. She tried to look toward the three Rojabians standing before her, but the bright light refused to relent. There was nothing for her to do but

wait, and so she stood, trembling at the thought of not going home.

Then the leader of the three spoke again. “We have received all of your transmissions concerning the Earth people,” he said. “You are to be commended for your diligence, loyalty, and sense of duty.”

“Th-th-thank you,” Josie stuttered.

“However, your mission is not by any means completed.”

“But—”

“Silence!” the leader cut Josie’s objection short. “These Earthlings need watching. Your own reports confirm this. You can not deny that.”

Josie nodded with reluctant agreement.

“You must be ever watchful,” the lead Rojaban squeaked. “We must know if or when Earth’s technology advances to the point of being a threat. You will continue to collect data on this world and this species. You will continue your reports. Do you understand?”

Tears welled in Josie’s eyes at the disappointment. But she had accepted this assignment willingly, understood her duty, and would see it through to the bitter end. “Yes,” she sobbed, “I understand.”

“Good.”

The leader paused, and the three Rojabians whispered amongst themselves.

Then the leader spoke again. “We understand your disappointment,” he squeaked. “We appreciate your sacrifice. We ask you to understand that you and your mission are vital to Rojab and our way of life. You are a ... *hero.*”

With that, the three Rojabians turned away. They disappeared into the

light, the heavy metallic doors noisily sliding shut behind them.

Josie again stood in dark, silent solitude. Slowly, she began to rock forward and backward. Soon, the door underneath her feet slid open. But she did not plummet downward. Instead, she hovered there for a moment. Within seconds, the invisible force that had lifted her up into the spacecraft returned her safely to the Earth.

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Santa Claus and his lead elf Gideon stood on the 7-Eleven's flat roof, watching the scene below. Time for everyone but them stood still, stopped by Gideon's time-control machine that made it possible for Santa to visit all of the children around the world in one night. Even Josie Sofu stood like an ice sculpture—frozen within a mid-rocking motion—on what has become *her* corner.

Gideon shuffled from foot to foot. “Do you think we did the right thing, Santa?”

Behind them, Santa's sleigh and eight reindeer glided in for a smooth landing atop the roof—bells jingling. Three giggling elves aboard the sleigh climbed out, joining Santa and Gideon at the roof's edge.

“I think we deserve an Academy Award for that performance,” one elf declared. “We were the best Rojaban's ever.”

The other two elves giggled in agreement.

Gideon smirked. “You're the only Rojaban's in existence, you silly fools.” The lead elf turned back to Santa. “I'm still not sure we did the right thing. I'm no therapist, but didn't we just feed into her delusion? Isn't she going to be even more unhappy than she was before the encounter ... I mean

... supposedly not being able to go back to Rojab and all?”

Santa’s eyes twinkled as he fixed his gaze on Josie below. “Gideon, we gave her an identity,” he explained while stroking his long, white beard with a gloved hand, “a validation of her beliefs, a home and a people to serve, and more importantly a reason to live.” The jolly, old man let out a hearty laugh. “It’s the perfect Christmas present, my little friend. It’s everything she ever wanted.”

With renewed conviction, Gideon grinned and nodded. He said, “I guess you’re right, Santa.” Then, the elf added, “as always.”

Santa slapped Gideon on the back. But his gaze still lingered on the woman who stood spellbound on the street corner below. He gave another hearty laugh and said, “Merry Christmas, Josie Sofu.”

With that, Santa and his elves climbed into the sleigh. A shake of the reins and a jingle of bells sent the reindeer and sleigh speeding off into the night. Below, time started again; life returned to normal on planet Earth.

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A chopping wind again ripped at Josie’s clothes as the Rojabian ship sped off into the night. Rocking back and forth with renewed enthusiasm, Josie telepathically bid her people farewell. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but a wide grin also played across her face; even though she remained on what she considered a hostile planet, she had finally made contact with her people and knew for a certainty that her sacrifice was worthwhile and appreciated back home; she was a *hero*.

And for the first time in years, she was happy.

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