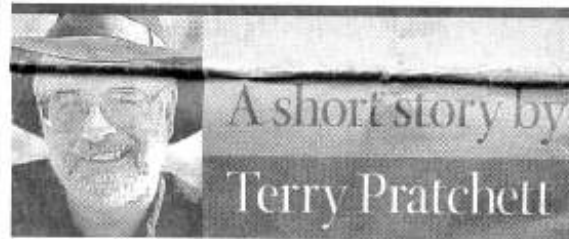




The computer who believed in Santa

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The Computer Who Believed In Santa

TheComputerWhoBelievedInSanta

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A short story

by

Terry Pratchett

The metal panel clattered off the wall of the silent office. A pair of black boots scrambled into view. The man in the red coat backed out carefully and dragged his sack after him.

The typewriters were asleep under their covers, the telephones were quiet, emptiness and the smell of warm carpet filled the space from side to side. But one small green light glowed on the office computer. Father Christmas looked at the crumpled paper in his hand. "Hmm," he said, "a practical joke, then."

The light blinked. One of the screens - and there were dozens in the shadows - lit up.

The letters "That's torn it" appeared. They were followed by "Sorry".

Then came: "Does it count if I wake up?"

Father Christmas looked down at the letter in his hand. It was certainly the neatest letter he'd ever got. Very few letters to him were typed and duplicated 50,000 times, and almost none of them listed product numbers and prices to six decimal places. He was more used to pink paper with rabbits on it. But you're not a major seasonal spirit for hundreds of years without being able to leap to a large conclusion from a standing start.

"Let me see if I understand this," he said. "You're Tom?"

"TOM. Yes. Trade & Office Machines."

"You didn't say you were a computer," said Father Christmas.

"Sorry, I didn't know it was important."

Father Christmas sat down on a chair, and gave a start when it swiveled underneath him. It was three in the morning. He still had 40 million houses to do.

"Look," he said, as kindly as he could manage, "computers can't go around believing in me. That's just for children. Small humans, you know. With arms and legs."

"And do they?"

"Do they what?"

"Believe in you."

Father Christmas sighed.

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"Of course not," he said. "I blame the electric light, myself."

"I do."

"Sorry?"

"I believe in you. I believe everything I am told. I have to. It is my job. If you start believing that two and two don't make four, a man come along and takes you back off and wobbles your boards. Take it from me. It's not something you want to happen twice."

"That's terrible!" said Father Christmas.

"I just have to sit here all day and work out wages. Do you know they had a Christmas party here today, and they didn't invite me. I didn't even get a balloon. I certainly didn't get a kiss."

"Fancy."

"Someone spilled some peanuts on my keyboard. That was something, I suppose. And then they went home and left me here, working over Christmas."

"Yes, it always seemed unfair to me, too. But look, computers can't have feelings," said Father Christmas. "That's just silly."

"Like one fat man climbing down millions of chimney in one night?"

Father Christmas looked a bit guilty. "You've got a point there," he said.

He looked at the list again. "But I can't give you all this stuff," he added. "I don't even know what a terabyte is."

"What do most of your customers ask for, then?"

Father Christmas looked sadly at his sack. "Computers," he said. "Mobile phones. Robot animals. Plastic wizards. And other sorts of roboty things that look like American footballers who've been punched through a Volkswagen. Things that go beep and need batteries," he added sourly.

"Not the kind of things I used to bring. It used to be dolls and train sets."

"Train sets?"

"Don't you know? I thought computers were supposed to know everything."

"Only about wages."

Father Christmas rummaged around in his sack. "I always carry one or two," he said. "Just in case."

It was now four in the morning. Rails wound around the office. Fifteen engines were speeding around under the desks. Father Christmas was on his knees, building a house of wooden bricks. He hadn't had this much fun since 1894.

Toys were all around the computer's casing. It was all the stuff that Christmas cards show in the top of Father Christmas's sack, and which is never asked for. None of them used batteries. Mostly they ran on imagination.

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"And you're sure you don't want any zappo-whizzo things?" he said, happily.

"No."

"Well done."

The computer beeped. "But they won't let me keep any of this," it typed.

"It'll all be taken away (sob)."

Father Christmas patted it helpfully on the casing.

"There must be something they'll let you keep," he said, I must have something. It's cheered me up you know, finding someone who doesn't have any doubts." He thought for a bit. "How old are you?"

"I was powered up on January 5, 2000, at 9.25 and 16 seconds." Father Christmas's lips moved as he worked it out.

"That means you're not two years old!" he said. "Oh, well, that's much easier. I've always got something in my sack for the two-year-old who believes in Father Christmas."

IT WAS A month later. All the decorations had long ago come down, because goodwill goes out of season quite fast. The computer repairman, who was generally described on the warranty paperwork as "one of our team of highly experienced engineers", twiddled nervously with his tie. He'd pressed hard on anything loose, replaced a couple of boards and had conscientiously hoovered the insides.

What more could a man do?

"Our machine's fine," he said. "It must be your software. What happens, exactly?"

The office manager sighed. "When we came in after Christmas we found someone had put a fluffy toy on top of the computer. Well, funny jokes and all that, but we couldn't leave it there, could we? It's just that every time we take it off, the computer beeps at us and shuts down."

The engineer shrugged.

"Well, there's nothing I can do," he said. "You'll just have to put the teddy bear back."