



Jack's Gift
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Jack's Gift

When Sandra was six, she asked the question for the first time.

"Daddy, is there a Santa Claus?"

And, like all first times, the answer was easy.

"You email him your list, and he sends you presents, doesn't he?"

"Yeah."

"So there must be a Santa Claus."

"Oh, okay." And she drifted off into the perfect sleep of children who have had the world sorted to their satisfaction.

When Sandra was eight, she asked something harder.

"Daddy, how come Santa doesn't bring all my gifts?"

"What do you mean, honey?"

"I don't get everything I ask for."

David had an answer ready. "Santa can't give you everything, even if he wants to. The whole world would be covered in toys."

"That would be great!"

"No, it wouldn't," David said. "The roads would be covered with toys, and we couldn't drive anywhere."

"Oh." Sandra liked going to Disney World.

"And we wouldn't have space to set up your big toys, like My First Pony."

"It's still too small to ride."

"Next year, honey, next year."

Sandra looked doubtful, but eventually fell into a deep sleep.

When Sandra was ten, though, she wanted real answers.

"Was there always a Santa Claus?" she asked.

David sighed and sat on the corner of her bed. Early rain sizzled against the windowpanes, the closest that Southern California would ever get to a white Christmas. It was time. She would understand enough. Still, he had her snug on her dataglasses and set them on context mode, so some of the more difficult concepts might make sense.

"Not so long ago," David said, "Santa Claus was just a story. You may have heard it. A man who lived at the North Pole, who worked all year with his elves to bring gifts to all the good little kids in the world."

"Santa's in Alaska," Sandra said.

David nodded. So she'd been doing some research. "He is now. But back then, he was just a story. Kids believed in him for a while, but then they found out that their dad was eating the cookies that they left for Santa."

"And no sleigh," Sandra said.

David smiled. "Kind of hard to have sleighs in Los Angeles."

"I guess so."

"But one day, a smart man named Jack —"

"Jack Frost?"

"Jack Hammond, actually."

"Oh."

"Anyway, Jack had a great idea. He saw the UDS driver wearing a bright red Santa hat while he made his deliveries. And he thought, 'Why couldn't they dress up as Santa Claus and deliver gifts to people on Christmas Eve? It'd be like Santa for real.'

"Jack wrote an email to the president of UDS, explaining his idea. He even sent a drawing of a UDS Santa, standing beside a UDS truck painted like a sleigh.

"Two months later, Jack got back a note from UDS, saying they didn't accept ideas from people who didn't work for them, but they were free to take it and do with it whatever they wanted. He shrugged, threw away the letter, and thought, 'Well, that's sad.'"

"Did Jack have kids?" Sandra said

"What?"

"Jack. Did he have kids?"

"Uh, actually, I don't know," David said. "Jack was a very private man. He kept his life off the nets. Some say he believed in Santa until he was fifteen—but I'm getting ahead of myself. What do you think happened to Jack's idea?"

"I don't know," Sandra said.

"Well, that September, UDS announced their new Christmas Eve delivery service. UDS ads showed jolly Santas driving UDS trucks painted to look like sleighs. 'We Make the Santa Experience Real,' is what they said."

"They stole his idea!"

David nodded. "And they added to it. They were going to have the Santas come into the houses to deliver the gifts late on Christmas eve, just like the story. They spent a lot of money to make it safe. Real-time monitoring, eleven-step screening, intensive training, satisfaction guaranteed. It was an expensive program, and not everyone could afford it."

"But Santa gives more stuff to Kellie than to me, and her dad doesn't have any money!"

"He does now. Not back then."

"Oh."

“Still, lots of people signed up for the UDS Santa. More than UDS expected. They had to hurry and convert a lot more trucks into sleighs, and find a lot more drivers. They didn’t have time to train them all. And their shipment of fat suits came in late, so a lot of the Santas were, uh, a little thin.”

Sandra frowned. “Santa is fat!”

“I know, I know,” David said. “But the big problem was all the drunk Santas, running over the hedges in their eight-ton trucks, scraping the side of Dad’s Mercedes as they parked in the driveway, making passes at Mom once they were in the house—”

“Making passes?”

David cleared his throat. “Anyway, UDS tried to pull the bad Santas as fast as they could, but they didn’t get all of them. There were fights. Lots of kids got to see their dads decking Santa. Thousands of kids didn’t get their presents delivered at all.”

Sandra looked confused. “What about Jack?”

“Jack saw the news, and it made him mad. It was his idea, but they’d broken it. So Jack went to his boss. Jack’s company made household robots, like those Jeeves the Valet and Sara the Chef models you might have seen—”

“In the junk store.”

“Yeah. Well, anyway, Jack’s company made robots, and his boss liked his idea enough to take him to the president. Jack showed him CAD renderings of robot Santas with bright red cheeks and round little bellies. He explained how the robots wouldn’t get drunk or get in fights. The president loved the idea.”

“So next year, when UDS was talking about its new fifteen-step screening program and breathalyzer tests, new ads appeared. They compared Jack’s clean robotic Santas with real images of drunken UDS Santas taken from found media. ‘Only a robotic Santa is a perfect Santa,’ the ads said.”

“So people got the robot Santas?”

“Some of them. A lot of them signed up for the human Santas, especially after UDS started cutting prices. So neighborhoods were filled with UDS trucks painted like sleighs and robotic santas carrying heavy bags of gifts.”

“I bet the robots were better!” Sandra said.

“Both had their problems,” David said. “There were still a few drunks and some fights on the human side. On the robotic side, there were some dead batteries, some problems with facial recognition in the house —”

“Facial recognition?”

“They sometimes thought the parents were the kids, or a boy was a girl.”

“Oh.”

“But the biggest problem was whoever programmed the voiding of the milk-and-cookies bladder.”

“What’s that?”

“People used to leave milk and cookies out for Santa. Jack’s company thought it would be neat to have the robots eat the cookies and drink the milk. But with so many houses to visit, they had to dump what they ate somewhere. They were supposed to do it discreetly in public bathrooms or in secluded areas, but some of them did it on porches, or on walkways, or even inside the house.”

“Yuck!”

“Yeah, it was bad.”

“Were you there?” Sandra asked. “Did you have a robot santa?”

“No. I didn’t get a Santa for a long time, not until Dark—but hey, I’ll tell you that later. I need to tell you about Jack.”

“Okay.”

“The robots may have had their problems, but for Jack’s company, the results were great. They almost doubled their earnings for that year.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s very good. Companies want to earn money. Jack helped them make a lot more money. The company was very happy.”

“So Jack got rich!”

“Well, not exactly,” David said. “They give him a \$500 bonus.”

Sandra frowned. “Is that a lot of money?”

“No.” David shook his head.

“So he quit!”

David sighed. “He didn’t quit, either. He liked the people he worked with, and he knew that the same thing would happen wherever he worked, so he stayed.”

“Next year, someone else had a new idea. They wanted their santas to come down the chimney. They used small, lightweight robots to go down chimneys and deposit gifts. When the little robots were in the house, they’d blow a thick fog into the room and project an image of Santa going about his work.”

“A lot of people liked that they could leave their front doors locked with the holo-santas. But I remember reading about it as a kid and thinking, ‘Those aren’t santas, not really, they’re just fake.’”

"What happened?" Sandra said.

"That year, there were three kinds of santas. UDS people in costume, Jack's full-size robot santas, and holographic santas. Prices came down, and more people could afford them. But Jack's company hadn't planned for the holo-santa competition, and they made too many of their big robotic santas. They lost money that year."

"What did Jack do?"

"Jack didn't do anything. After that holiday season, his company laid him off."

"Then what'd he do?"

David frowned and bowed his head. "That's the sad part of the story. For a few years, Jack didn't do much of anything. He tried to get another job, but it was really, really hard. He had to work at a fast food place. He had to give up his house. His wife divorced him."

"What happened that Christmas?" Sandra asked.

"The year after Jack got fired, the holo-santas were the most popular. And when things get big, mistakes happen. The miniature robots scratched siding and fences. Some of them burned up in fireplaces. Children were traumatized when the smokescreen didn't work. So a lot of people got together and sued the company that made them. I thought that was the end of them, but they were back next year. My mom even signed up for them that year."

"Grandma?"

"Yes, Grandma," David said. He frowned. "I didn't want her to. I wanted the big robot santas. But it didn't matter. I never got my gifts."

"Why not?"

"That was Dark Christmas."

"What's that?"

"It was a nightmare. Seven new companies entered the santa market, each with their own spin on the santa story. There were human santas and big robotic santas and little robotic santas and holographic santas and sleigh blimps and cloud projections and even automated aircraft and full-size ultralightweight santas. Ninety million families signed up for some kind of Santa service that year.

"On Christmas eve, santas swarmed the streets as soon as it was dark. Every other person in a crowd was a chubby man in red velvet, wearing a funny hat. They were everywhere.

"And that wouldn't have been so bad, except for a couple of bad companies who wanted to make sure their competition couldn't deliver their toys. There were robotic Santas wrestling with humans, ultralightweight

Santas crushing the mini-robots, package-delivery robots swarming the sleigh-blimps, three different kinds of automated Santas fighting in front yards, in houses, on the street. It looked like a riot."

Bright tears brimmed in Sandra's eyes. "Why?" she said. "Why did they fight?"

"I don't know," David said, softly. "Maybe they thought they'd get more of the market next year if their gifts got through and others didn't. But it didn't work that way. Nobody's gifts got through. Less than twenty percent delivered. And millions of kids crying because they saw their favorite person in the world fighting himself, again and again, over and over. Look, you're crying yourself, and I'm just telling you the story."

"Did you ... did you see them, daddy?"

"I did," David said. He still remembered. He was nine when Dark Christmas came. He knew there were lots of different kinds of Santas. But when the first robotic Santa went rushing from tree to tree in his front yard like a soldier in a wargame, he knew something was wrong. When two more Santas, shiny with human sweat, appeared from the street and chased the robot down, David knew that something had changed forever. He watched as they bore the heavy robot to the earth and beat it with a aluminum baseball bat until its skin tore and shiny metal parts showed. Then they went into David's own yard, jumping on the small machines that bore his own gifts. He saw clockwork fly, and heard tiny metal screams. One of the human Santas passed by his window, and for a moment David saw a terrible sneer, as if to say, This is what you get, did you expect anything else?

But that wasn't the worst. The worst was the robotic Santa laying in his neighbor's yard, bleating "Ho, ho, ho," and "Merry Christmas!" in a shrill mechanical voice, its body twitching feebly, the whirring of its servos like the cries of a small dog.

"What did Jack do?" Sandra said.

"The last thing we know for sure about Jack is that he blamed himself. He posted on his blog that it was all his idea, it was a dumb idea, and he shouldn't be surprised that everyone took it and tore it apart.

"After that, things get hazy. We know that Jack's message made its way to virtually every board and blog and chatroom in the world on the day after Dark Christmas. We know that the volume of replies almost brought the global net to its knees. And we know he received at least one reply from Herbert Francis."

"Who's that?"

"Don't you have context on?" David said, tapping his own dataglasses.

"Yeah," Sandra said. A pause. "What's nanotechnology?"

"It's what Herbert Francis was known for. He did the first large-scale self-assembling machines. Nothing really impressive, since the growth was so slow. People used to expect nanotechnology to be like magic. Pour some gray goo on a car in a junkyard, have a new car in an hour or so, things like that. Now we know it's more like life. Slow and steady."

"So Jack went to work for Herbert?"

"Not exactly," David said. "Jack didn't want to work for anyone anymore. And after Dark Christmas, most everyone went back to buying gifts themselves for a while. But eventually, it started up again, with robots that were a lot more advanced, and people under real-time control, and guarantees that they wouldn't interfere with each other during their course of business. Congress even passed a law about it, the Guaranteed Happy Holidays Act, so if they broke it, they'd be committing a federal crime. So Jack started talking to Herbert. But he also started talking to a lot of other people. People who said they could help."

"Help with what?"

"We don't know. We don't know if Jack had the idea already, or if it developed over time. If it was going to be a robot, or not. We do know that Jack and Francis pulled in people from all over the world to help, and that they worked in their spare time."

"What were they making?"

"They were making what Jack dropped on Alaska. He took a chartered plane deep into the Yukon, and dropped a small package."

"The North Pole factory."

"Right."

"And then Jack was famous!"

"Not exactly. For many years, nothing happened. Jack went back to his fast food job and Herbert avoided the press."

"The seed spent ten years growing under the ground, drinking in glacier water, burrowing deep through the permafrost to reach Alaskan oil, listening to the global network on bleed from wireless repeaters and satellite splash. When it finally bloomed big iridescent solar-panels on the surface, it was like an iceberg, ninety percent of it invisible."

"Daddy, are you reading from a script?"

David smiled and adjusted his own dataglasses. "Yeah, sorry honey."

"I like it better when you talk yourself."

"I'll do the rest in my own voice. Except for the quote. You need to hear that in Jack's words. Is that all right?"

"All right."

"The year the factory bloomed, the first kids got their packages. Only the most needy at first, and only the kids who had their gotta-have-it lists online. It was a complete shock. All over the world, little white packages started arriving with a return address of 'The North Pole, Alaska,' and a little hand-written note inviting all the children to post their wish-lists for Santa."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why was it a surprise?"

"Because it had never happened before. Nobody paid for those gifts. And the gifts were the latest toys. Perfect copies of what everyone wanted. Except for their origin stamps. China and Japan and Taiwan and the United States were replaced by North Pole Factories, Alaska."

"Just like today."

"Yeah. Just like today. But back then, everyone was in an uproar. Things like that didn't happen. How were the gifts made? How did they pay to ship them? What else could the factories make? Could they make bombs? Could they make weapons?"

Sandra laughed. "It's the North Pole. They wouldn't make stuff like that!"

"But nobody knew that. People looked at the satellite photos at the solar panels blooming under the Arctic sun and wondered what was growing there, and if it would hurt them. They were scared."

Sandra laughed harder.

"The United States sent in a team of people to see what was going on. But when they got near the North Pole factories, their comm went down. When they went farther, they got headaches that made them stop.

"They flew over it with unmanned planes, but the cameras didn't work. Things were fuzzy, or the photos showed stuff that patently wasn't there, like dwarves and reindeer.

"And so Congress met again. A lot of people thought the North Pole Factories were dangerous. They wanted them destroyed."

"No!" Sandra wailed.

"And if it hadn't been for Jack, Real Christmas may never have happened."

"What did Jack do?"

"The government knew he was the person who dropped the seed for the North Pole Factories. So they went down to his fast-food job and took him in. Jack was ready, though, and everyone saw it. Found media spread across the net. Then the emails started to come in. First only ten thousand. Then a hundred. Then a million. Eventually, over forty million Americans demanded the President let Jack go.

"So the President went to see Jack. And that's where we have the last real record of him. There's a video of him sitting in front of a metal desk. The president comes in and sits down. Jack asks him if he has children. The President says yes, of course. And then Jack says:

"And so you would steal the holidays from them again.'

"I'm afraid of what your factory might produce,' the President says.

"It produces nothing but the dreams of small children,' Jack says.

"It uses our oil, our iron, our gold,' says the President.

"It creates wonder and hope, which should be worth more,' Jack says.

"You are a threat to our country,' the President says.

"And Jack pauses. And says nothing for a long time. Then, finally, slowly, 'You really think it's your country anymore?'

"And Jack shows him something. Nobody knows what it was. Maybe a real diagram of how big the open-source Santa project was. Maybe just his chances for re-election, if the network voted the other way. Maybe something more deeply affecting, because the President cried."

"The President cried?" Sandra said, open-mouthed.

"Yes, he did," David said. "And after that, there were no more meetings of congress. No more jets flying over the North Pole factories. The President went on the nets and talked to the world. Just once. He told them the United States was giving them the North Pole Factories to everyone. He invited children from all over the world to email santa. He said, This is Jack's gift. There was a moment where he looked around the audience, as if looking for someone. Maybe he was looking for Jack. But Jack had disappeared. Nobody knows where he is now, or if he's still alive."

"Jack lives at the North Pole," Sandra said.

David shook his own head. We make our own myths, he thought. New ones for new times.

"You help him," Sandra said.

"What?"

"You help Jack."

"I ... um." David thought he could wait a few more years to explain that.

“All the boxes you send,” Sandra said, yawning. Her eyes fluttered and closed.

Saved by the sandman, David thought. Though she might ask him tomorrow. She might ask about the packages he forwarded on, or the gold that he used to pay for them, or the myriad of messages that he got from the santanet all year round. Thinking up new toys, figuring who was most needy, designing the actual implementations, shipping the millions of packages ... David didn't know how big the santanet was, but it was huge. Nobody doing a lot. Nobody spending a lot of time. Just like Jack and his seed.

But everybody doing a little bit. Everyone doing their part.

So that there wouldn't be a Dark Christmas.

Ever again.

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