



*Santa Claus vs.
The Marketers*

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SANTA CLAUS VS. THE MARKETERS



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“Dear MR. CLAUS: You have been pre-approved for a Platinum Direct Visa card at just 22.9% interest...”

“Dear Santa: Every minute of every day, 10 people suffer light-bulb related fatalities. Could you be next?”

“Dear Mr. Kringle: You may have already won –”

Santa Claus put down the last of the letters in the sack and sighed. “You’re telling me they’re **all** like this?”

Wheeze, the elf in charge of mail sorting and redirection, nodded unhappily. “Out of 154 bags of Christmas mail we’ve received so far, 99% of it is junk mail.”

Santa scratched the red velour hat that was already starting to chafe him and looked around the immense mailroom. Heaps of mail ran on conveyor belts towards the disposal furnace, while only one small pile sat in the ‘Girls and Boys’ stack. Glass message tubes circled and crossed the air overhead. “That means,” Santa said, doing some quick math, “that we’ve only received 28 real letters from children so far.”

Wheeze cleared his throat. “Well, actually Mr. Claus, 29, if you count the letter from little Willie Jones in Kansas City.”

Santa broke out into an unexpected grin. “Let’s see it.”

Wheeze dashed over to the Girls and Boys stack and came back with a handwritten note on lined paper that looked like it had been used to wrap a tuna sandwich. “Dear Santa,” Santa Claus read. “You suck! Sincerely, Willie Jones.”

He paused a moment, then burst out laughing. “Nine-year-olds!” Santa said, wiping his eyes. “Well, we can always count on Willie.”

“Are you going to give him a lump of coal this year?” Wheeze asked hopefully.

Santa glared at Wheeze. “Now, now. You know that’s just a myth. Nobody **ever** gets a lump of coal.”

Still, as Santa turned away from the mail-sorting table, he was troubled. Only 29 letters to Santa so far, and it was already early November! Why, thirty years ago the Girls and Boys stack would have reached to the roof. And now...

Well, maybe the E-mail Division would have better news. Santa started in that direction, but Wheeze stepped in his way. “Santa, you really don’t want to go there,” Wheeze said.

Santa looked down at the wizened elf. “It’s worse?”

“With all the spam coming in, and the filters from the ISPs, we can hardly tell if we’re getting any e-mail from kids at all,” Wheeze said. “And what we are getting...” He shook his head. “One of the spams said I could grow eight-and-a-half inches. Is that possible?”

Before Santa could reply, there was a whistling noise overhead. They both looked up to see a message whirl around through the various tubes, spin up and down, and finally pop out of a message tube hatch inches from Santa’s hand.

It was a Board Memorandum, wrapped around a candy cane. This couldn’t be good news, Santa thought.

He read the memo and his face darkened. “Put more elves on the sorting line,” he instructed Wheeze. “Take them off Production if you have to.”

“But Veronica –” Wheeze objected.



“I’ll deal with our VP of Production,” Santa said, tossing the Board Memorandum into a bin and crunching the candy cane angrily between his teeth. Quickly he started down the long hallway towards the Administration Center of Claus, Inc.

The Board was already assembled in the snowy boardroom. As CEO of Claus, Inc., Santa Claus took his seat at the end of the ice boardroom table and looked around the mist at the other members of the Board. All elves – he was the only human. For the first time, he wondered if they resented him for that.

A small cup of hot chocolate steamed on the table before him, and he took a sip. “What’s this all about?” Santa asked without preamble. “Why’d you call a meeting without informing me first?”

The Chief Operating Elf (COE) looked around until he was sure nobody else was willing to speak. “We’re in a crisis situation,” he explained. “You’ve seen our drop in customers.”

Santa winced. He hated it when the Board referred to children as ‘customers.’ “Go on.”

“Production’s even worse. The worker elves are demanding raises that we can’t meet. Shipping has over-ordered gift wrap and bows that we can’t return. And I won’t even discuss the production situation.”

At the word ‘production,’ a hush fell over the Board. Nobody ever discussed how the Santa’s Workshop division of Claus, Inc. was able to produce enough toys for the world’s girls and boys. It was a trade secret.

The COE looked around unhappily. “I hate to be blunt, but we have to face facts. Unless we can turn Claus, Inc. around, we’re not going to be around next year.”

Santa sighed and breathed out steam. No Claus, Inc.? It was unimaginable. But he’d seen the signs. Declining shipments, less media coverage. He hadn’t written a “Yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus” letter in years. “What are you proposing?”

The Chief Technology Elf (CIE) replied. “The Board came to a decision in your absence...while you were in Tahiti in October. We’ve got to bring Claus, Inc. into the 21st century. No more sleighs. No more hand-made assembly lines. There are dozens of new technologies and business processes”

Santa heard the unspoken ‘or else.’ “Or else what?” he asked, already regretting having taken Mrs. Claus for a jaunt to the tropics.

“Or else,” the CIE said, looking at the ground, “The Board will exercise its majority stockholder control to implement these proposals.”

“I won’t stand for it!” Santa thundered. “We’ve done things the same way for centuries. As long as I’m CEO, we’ll continue to do them the old-fashioned way.”

The COE shook his head. “I’m afraid the Board does have a controlling interest in Claus, Inc.’s shares,” he said with regret. “If it’s necessary...we’re not going to let you stand in our way.”

Then it was clear. Santa banged down the hot chocolate and stormed out of the icy boardroom. They were going to get rid of him. Appoint some figurehead – or worse, a celebrity in his place.

He wouldn’t let it happen. Not as long as even one child continued to believe in him. Even if that child happened to be little Willie Jones.

* * * *



Santa's house was a split-level lodge on the edge of the Claus, Inc. corporate campus. As Santa trudged towards it through the slanting snow, he grumbled to himself. It figured that the Board would want to replace him. Ever since he'd opposed the computerization of the Naughty/Nice system, they'd been out to get him.

The door to his lodge flung open a moment before he got there. Veronica, Vice-President of Production, was standing in the doorway, hands on her hips. "You took 20 elves off my production line to sort mail?" she asked, eyes blazing.

Santa said nothing. Then Veronica saw his expression, the slump of his shoulders, and the limpness of his hat, and she sighed and welcomed him into her arms. "The Board again?" Veronica Kringle said.

Santa welcomed his wife's embrace, and didn't say anything for a long minute. Then he pulled away and started removing his ceremonial clothes, a transformation that turned him from Santa Claus back into Kris Kringle. First the red hat, then the red jacket and white gloves, and lastly the boots (which Veronica helped him to pull off). Finally, he sank into the sofa that faced the crackling fireplace, and Veronica joined him. "Want a hot chocolate?" she asked.

"I need something stronger."

Minutes later, he had a mug of cider in his hands, and Santa was already feeling better. "I can't believe they want you out," Veronica said when he'd recounted the Board meeting.

He shrugged. "Some of them see me as an ogre. Or a slave driver. Take your pick. I never thought there was a racial issue about human-elf relations, but I could be wrong..."

Veronica looked at him with a determined gaze. "Well, you're not going to give up without a fight, are you?"

Santa sighed. "I started out hand-making all of the toys. I know manufacturing, not office politics. I'm ready to fight, but I'm not sure where to start."

Veronica nodded. "I do. This whole thing's really about image and perception, isn't it? The Board thinks you're old-fashioned, and that your image is tainting Claus, Inc. Well, let's use fire to fight fire."

The next day, Veronica and Santa met with Rob Slate, public relations rep for Claus, Inc. He was dressed in traditional marketer garb – black jeans, black turtleneck, and horn-rimmed glasses. But Rob was also a computer whiz, and would've become a hacker if Santa hadn't intervened when Rob was quite young.

Santa looked around Rob's office, stopping at the framed Time Magazine cover proclaiming Santa "Man of the Year" for 1978. Those were good times, Santa thought, even if his lapels had been much, much wider than he'd been comfortable with.

Rob ushered them in, then peeked into the hallway and shut the door. "Sorry for all the secrecy," he said easily, "but there are weird things going on out there. Elise is on the warpath, and nobody knows why."

Elise was the Vice-President of Marketing. Santa had a very good idea why she would be on the warpath, but he said nothing.

"We're up against the Board," Veronica said to Rob, "and I know we can trust you." Santa recalled that the three of them had worked late hours one year to fix the mishap that had occurred when Ex-Lax was sent out instead of Christmas chocolates. "I want you to put a positive spin on Santa."

Rob folded his hands. "Sure, no problem," he said. "I can write all the press releases, back-



grounders, Q&A sheets you want.” He shook his head. “But they’re not going to have any credibility coming from within Claus, Inc. What you need is an independent outsider to write a piece. A journalist.”

Santa walked around the office and sat on the edge of the desk. “Do you have anyone in mind?” he asked.

“Nancy Sanders works the Toys beat at **Breaking Ground Magazine**,” Rob replied. He grinned. “She’s a soft touch, and she’s a traditionalist. I think we can fly her up here in a few days and get a great piece on you. It’s been a while since you’ve had any media coverage, hasn’t it?”

Santa thought back. “Not since the Barbara Walters special in 1998. Are you sure you can get her?”

Rob smiled. “Leave it up to me.”

* * * *

The helicopter raised swirling clouds of snow as it landed in the center of the Claus, Inc. campus, next to the red and white-striped barbershop post indicating the North Pole. Santa, Veronica, and Rob were there to greet it; the Board had wisely stayed away.

It took a minute for the snow to clear after the whup-whup of the helicopter blades faded, and a striking figure emerged from the falling flakes. “Samantha Wave, **Breaking Ground Magazine**,” the tall redheaded woman said, pumping Santa’s hand vigorously and ignoring Veronica and Rob.

“I thought they were sending Nancy Sanders,” Rob said.

Samantha brushed away an invisible speck from her form-fitting Gore-Tex outfit. “Nancy was part of last month’s reduction in force. She’s old school. I’m an agent of change, that’s why I survived. Breaking Ground’s covering the latest and greatest business advancements now.”

Santa wondered if he could just push her back into the helicopter and send her away. But Samantha was already striding towards the corporate offices, ruggedized PDA in hand, and it was all he could do to keep up with her. Veronica and Rob, both looking unhappy, followed.

Their first stop was the Mailroom Division. “As you can see,” Rob explained, “letters and e-mails come in from children around the world. Elves sort them and enter the names and requests into the computer system.” Santa saw that Rob was standing between Samantha and the sorting tables, trying to block her view of the junk mail.

Samantha tapped her stylus on the PDA and raised an eyebrow. “What about privacy?”

Santa and Rob looked at each other. “I don’t follow,” Santa said.

Samantha waved an arm to indicate the entire Mailroom process. “You’ve got millions of children sending letters and e-mails to you. You’re maintaining a giant marketing list, in effect. And you don’t have any privacy regulations?”

Santa didn’t know what to say.

“What’s to stop you from selling your lists to another company,” Samantha went on, “say a marketing company? Have you even **heard** of the COPPA?”

“We use copper in our production processes...” Veronica said hesitantly.

Samantha dismissed her with a look. “COPPA - the **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998**. You’re not getting parental consent for any of this. It’s a liability nightmare.”

No coal, Santa thought desperately, no coal, no coal. “Do you want to see the Naughty/Nice room?” he asked, trying to change the subject.



Her eyebrow rose even further. “So...it’s not enough that you compile information on these children, you also pass value judgments on them?”

Oh, Santa thought, this was not going well at all.

The Naughty/Nice Room was a low-ceiling room with hundreds of computers on low wooden tables. At each computer, in front of a tiny keyboard, sat a grey or white mouse, tapping away intently.

The journalist sighed. “I’m not even going to bring up the animal-rights issue – I’m sure the SPCA and PETA would have a field day here. Just tell me what the hell mice are doing typing on computers?”

Santa was starting to realize that Samantha Wave was one of those journalists whom, no matter what you said, it would come out wrong. “The mice monitor all of the children every year to see if they’re good or bad. Then they come up to the North Pole and file their reports. It all ends up on the Big Board over there.” He pointed to a large display on one wall that looked like a mechanical scale with a pointer between NAUGHTY at one end and NICE at the other end. The pointer was leaning in the NICE direction, fortunately.

Samantha flipped the cover to her PDA closed with a snap. “You’ve gone the Total Information Awareness program one better!” she said, aghast. “Rodents are spying on U.S. children and keeping files on them? What happens if children are ‘naughty’? Do the mice eat them?”

“No, no,” Rob said hastily, guiding Samantha away from the mice, some of which had started to look up from their work and wiggle their whiskers in an offended way. “No matter how naughty or nice a child is, every boy and girl always gets presents.”

She shrugged off his hand and glared at Santa. “So it’s a sham. There’s no purpose for this surveillance system at all. Why do you do it?”

Santa was about to reply that they’d always done it that way, but he suspected that an ‘agent of change’ wouldn’t take kindly to that argument. Exchanging unhappy glances with Veronica, he kept his mouth shut.

After seeing the Packaging, Shipping, and Administration sections of Claus, Inc., the tour came to a halt back at the barbershop pole. Rob was squirming, Veronica looked like she wanted to be on the manufacturing floor, and Santa just wanted the interview to be over.

Samantha thanked them all perfunctorily, and then stepped into the waiting helicopter. And then she stopped, a frown crossing her face.

“There’s something missing,” she said, stepping out of the helicopter. She looked around for a moment, and then Santa saw comprehension dawn on her face.

“Your supplies,” Samantha said. “Your raw materials. Where are they? Where are the trucks, the railroads, the shipping lines?” She shook her head. “I mean, everyone knows you distribute your product via sleigh, but where does it **come from**?”

The trade secret, Santa thought with dismay. And if she started poking around the annual reports and the company records...

“Magic,” he said.

“Magic?” Samantha replied. “Magic?”

“Yes,” Santa said more firmly. “It’s magic.”

Samantha looked at him like he was from another planet. “So you’re saying you can basically conjure up any toy. A Playstation? A Barbie doll? A PS2?”



He nodded. “Basically, yes.”

“You know,” Samantha said, conversationally, “the executives I interviewed at Enron and WorldCom said their accounting practices were ‘magic,’ too...”

“I’d show you myself,” Veronica said, “but the Manufacturing Floor’s off-limits to non-personnel.”

“Oh, I don’t need to see it,” Samantha said with a wry smile. “I understand perfectly.”

And with that she stepped into the helicopter, and Rob, Veronica, and Santa backed away as it rose into the air.

What was it? Santa wondered. What had he said?

* * * *

He didn’t have to wait long. **Breaking Ground Magazine** was published bi-weekly, and the next board meeting was timed to coincide with its release.

“While the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) goes after music pirates, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) goes after video pirates, and the BSA goes after software pirates, there’s one pirate that’s getting away with murder,” the Chief Operating Elf read from a copy of the magazine that had been faxed to Claus, Inc.’s corporate offices.

He put a sheet of paper from the fax on a slot in the frosty boardroom table and pressed a button. An image of the fax lit up the far wall. Santa Claus, wearing a pirate hat, an eyepatch, and a speech bubble that said “Yo Ho Ho!”

The COE read on. “It’s not the shameless disregard for privacy that should bother the American public. No, it’s the blatant disregard of copyright and patent laws. Santa’s Workshop doesn’t buy toys from manufacturers and redistribute them to children – it copies them, out of thin air! This is piracy of the highest order, and I’m surprised the electronics companies haven’t stepped in yet.”

All eyes turned to Santa, who was fidgeting on the ice-cold executive chair. “We have no intention of getting rid of you,” the Chief Operating Elf said quietly. “We’re facing a PR crisis, and you’re a recognizable brand image – even if you’re a liability right now.”

He clapped his elfin hands, and the side doors slowly opened, pushing their way through the snow on the boardroom floor. “We’re going to have to rehabilitate your image, and Claus, Inc. while we’re at it.”

A man and a woman walked into the boardroom. He was tall and sleek; she was short and Rubenesque. They both had the slick sheen that Santa automatically associated with marketers.

“I’m Paul Bowman,” the man said, coming over and extending his hand to Santa. Santa didn’t take it. Undaunted, Paul introduced his partner. “This is Melanie Strat. We’re the principals at Bowman-Strat consulting, and we’re here to solve all your problems.”

Santa remained silent. “It’s all over the media,” the Chief Technology Elf piped up. “We have to update our business practices, and we’ve got to salvage you as a brand icon.”

So that’s what I am now, Santa thought. A brand icon.

Paul leaned in towards Santa. “Look, we don’t want to change anything too dramatically. A few cosmetic touches here, some press releases there, and you’ll be back on top before you know it. Remember the Tylenol disaster?”

“You handled that account?” Santa asked dubiously.

“No, but I read about it in high school.” Paul placed a firm hand on Santa’s shoulder. “You



have nothing to worry about.”

And truthfully, Santa realized, he was in no position to do anything about it. The rest of the Board looked happy – someone was coming in to shake things up. And with centuries of tradition, what could a couple of consultants possibly do to ruin Claus, Inc.?

As he passed Paul and Melanie to leave the boardroom, he heard Paul say in hushed tones, “Don’t worry, there are going to be a **lot** of changes around here.”

Santa gritted his teeth and slammed the ice door to the boardroom so hard that icicles fell from it. Not if he could help it, he thought grimly.

* * * *

“Branding is something we do to the reindeer,” Santa told Melanie during their meeting the next week. “Are you going to use a branding iron on me?”

Melanie laughed. They were in Conference Room 3, a far cry from the chilliness of the main boardroom. Melanie had removed the tables and placed the chairs in a circle. So far, it was just Santa and her sitting opposite from each other, her pen poised over a pad of paper and her legs neatly crossed. Santa dreaded the thought of who might be called upon to fill the rest of the seats in the room.

“Branding is,” Melanie started, and then thought about it. “Branding is sort of the ‘look and feel’ of a company. Or its products. Or, in this case, its representatives. You.”

“I don’t understand,” Santa said.

Melanie pondered some more. “Branding is the set of intangible qualities that cause consumers to buy one product over another. Say, Windows vs. Macintosh. Or Kleenex vs. Softies.”

Santa just shook his head.

Melanie’s voice betrayed only a hint of impatience. “You’ll understand it a lot better once we get started. Now, first off, let’s take a look at your outfit.”

“My ‘outfit’ has been in the family for hundreds of years,” Santa said in a warning tone.

“Right, right, and I’m not suggesting we replace it at all. Red happens to be the color people notice the most, did you know that?” There was a rap at the door, and Melanie went to open it. Santa recognized Pina, one of the elves from Packaging, hands full of material.

“Did you know that Pina here is a seamstress?” Melanie asked, leading the elf into the room. She didn’t wait for him to reply. “Well, she and I have been working on some wonderful concepts to enhance your look.”

She motioned Santa to stand up. “Now, the first thing we have to do is make you look thinner.”

“I’m fat and jolly!” Santa objected. “My belly shakes like a bowl full of jelly!”

Melanie took out a tape measure and started taking measurements. “Yes, and that’s not the image we want to project. With over two-thirds of the American population overweight, physical fitness has to be emphasized. We don’t have enough time to get you into shape – although Rolf, my personal trainer, is on his way – but there are fashion techniques women have used for ages. Pina, hand me the shoulder pads!”

Minutes later, Santa observed himself in a full-length mirror. “I look like I have wings,” he grumbled.

“Excellent!” Melanie chirped. “That way we can also capitalize on the worldwide interest in angels and other supernatural phenomena. Now, next on our agenda...”



By mid-afternoon, Santa Claus had shoulder pads, vertical stripes, wide lapels, and a taller hat. He drew the line at trimming his beard – “Nobody touches the beard except Mrs. Claus.”

Melanie smiled. “You already look 20 pounds thinner. And once we get your image digitized, I can compress it horizontally even more.”

There was another knock at the door, and a troop of unhappy men and women filed in. Doing a quick count, Santa realized that Melanie had invited all of the vice-presidents and senior management – everyone who wasn’t on the Board. For whatever reason, Veronica wasn’t there. Santa was glad; he felt like a bobsled racer.

“Here’s our focus group,” Melanie said. “Ideally, we’d use people from outside Claus, Inc., but we don’t have the luxury of time. First, we’re going to start with a brainstorm session about your new outfit, and then we’re going to discuss the reorganization of your reindeer.”

“My reindeer?” Santa asked in disbelief.

Melanie nodded. “You have far too many – the average school-age student can only remember three or four. We’re in licensing talks with a major fast food chain to rename your reindeer after their hamburgers.”

Santa just groaned. Melanie turned to the focus group. “Now, when you see Santa in his new outfit, what’s the first word that comes to mind? Come on, don’t censor yourself. We value free expression here.”

“Bobsled racer,” the VP of Packaging said.

“Luge,” the VP of Distribution said.

“Action figure,” Elise, the VP of Marketing said.

“All right,” Melanie said slowly. “Let’s try the brainstorming session again, only this time you’re allowed to censor yourself. Try the **second** thing that comes to mind.”

Elise had just said, “Hallmark ornament” when Veronica burst into the conference room. She gave Santa’s outfit a double take, but clearly she had more on her mind. “Come on, quickly, all of you. Something terrible has happened!”

“No, wait, we haven’t even gotten to the roller blades yet!” Melanie cried, but everyone ignored her and rushed out into the hallway. Santa followed Veronica at a jog to the employee cafeteria, where he was confronted by dozens of elfin faces, all angry. A buzz of high-pitched voices filled the air.

“Traitor!” “Sell-out!” “Corporate shill!”

“What happened?” Santa asked Veronica.

Wheeze stepped forward. “Claus, Inc. just laid off 220 of us.”

“Seventy percent of our workforce...gone?” Santa asked, disbelieving.

“Relax,” Paul Bowman said from behind him. “They’re not gone. It’s a ‘reduction in force.’”

“You mean they’ve been fired.”

“Downsized. Outsized. Smart-sized. We’ll come up with a good name for the press release.” Paul moved through the short elfish crowd, distributing packets. “You’ll find a generous severance pay here, along with certificates for retraining.”

“How are you going to retrain them?” Santa asked, dumbfounded. “They’ve worked here all their lives!”



Paul shrugged. “One retraining company suggested they could become jockeys. There’s also a big need for tunnel workers in Tallahassee.”

“And how are we going to ship our gifts on time?” Veronica demanded. “We can’t make do with 30% of our workforce!”

Paul was placating. “Don’t worry. With CRM and our new processes, you’ll be even faster than before. None of this antiquated sleigh delivery...”

Santa slowly turned around. Through the frosted windows of the employee cafeteria, he could see the reindeer pens. And then he knew what was missing. “Rudolph,” he breathed. “Where in God’s name is Rudolph?”

“Ahh,” Paul said. “Slight problem with that one. You see, his nose hasn’t been UL-approved, and we have some potential nose-radiation concerns...”

But Santa was already out of the cafeteria jogging towards the reindeer pens, harsh wind blowing against his face. Veronica kept pace with him, and when they reached the pen Santa realized why he couldn’t see Rudolph’s nose glowing.

Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer was covered, antlers to hoofs, with a yellow plastic suit marked HAZMAT. His hooves were tied to the pen. The other reindeer cowered in their corners.

“They won’t even let him join in their reindeer games,” Veronica said tightly.

Shackled and bound, Santa thought. Just like me.

* * * *

In late November, Rob joined Claus, Inc.’s Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Team. He’d voiced his disagreement to Elise with Bowman-Strat’s marketing direction often enough that Elise had decided he’d become a liability. But Elise decided not to fire him, since she knew he had Santa and Veronica Claus’s protection.

Instead, using her office-politics savvy, Elise had him transferred to the CRM team. She’d heard rumors that it was late and over-budget, and what better way to get rid of someone than to land him on a sinking ship?

Rob met with Paul in the Naughty/Nice Room, where the mice had already been shunted to one corner and large servers and new workstations had been installed. All of Claus, Inc. was undergoing a facelift, especially the new Media Relations Center, which was being built around the North Pole barbershop pole. Rob could see elf construction crews through the slatted windows of the Naughty/Nice Room.

“I’m glad to welcome you onto the CRM team,” Paul said, not sounding glad at all. “We’ve already come a long way towards integrating all of Claus Inc.’s systems, and I’m sure we can use your help and marketing knowledge.”

Paul took him over to one side of the large room, where an enormous diagram hung on the wall, replacing the Naughty/Nice-O-Meter. “Here’s the basic workflow for the company,” Paul explained. “Letters and e-mails come in from children here. Letters are automatically scanned using high-speed sheet-fed scanners and optical character recognition. Then, the CRM software extracts names, addresses, and gift requests and enters them into each child’s record, here.”

Paul drew lines across the diagram. “Everything takes place on a just-in-time basis. Production, Packaging, Shipping, and Distribution all know exactly how many gifts are needed at any time. No overruns, no worries about running out of toys.”

Rob rocked back and forth on his heels. “That all sounds great, but how is it really better than it was before when elves were doing it?”



Paul shot him a sideways glance. “It’s computerized. Everything’s computerized. That means no errors, no delays, and no labor disputes. Trust me, it’s just better.”

Rob let the matter drop. Paul assigned him to help train the mice to write the code that would link the customer-facing applications (e-mail and letter input) to the ERP systems (Production, Packaging, Shipping, and Distribution). He had to admit that it **was** going to be a lot more efficient, but many things troubled him.

The cost overruns, for one. Paul and Melanie were constantly flying up implementation specialists from Bowman-Strat, specialists who had to be trained from scratch on Claus Inc.’s systems and processes. Rob suspected that this would lead to delays, but the projections at the weekly reports always showed the CRM system in place and functioning by December 24th.

One evening in early December, Rob left the CRM Team Room after a long day of work. He paused in front of the new Media Relations Center, which was a glistening tower of glass and steel, topped by the giant glass Santa and sleigh. **That** they have money for, he thought. Then he turned around and ran face-first into Melanie Strat.

They both fell into the snow, and Melanie was the first one up. She extended a hand to him, and Rob grinned. “Sorry about that.”

“You were admiring the new building,” Melanie said. “Who can blame you? It’s striking, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s great.” Rob had always found Melanie to be icily attractive, but now that the fall had dishevelled her hair, he saw how beautiful she really was. “Would you like to go out for dinner?” he asked hesitantly.

“There’s a restaurant at the North Pole?”

He laughed. “I can cook something up for us at the employee cafeteria.”

The cafeteria was deserted at that late hour. Melanie sat on one of the kitchen counters as Rob whipped up an omelette for two and a salad. “Do you like working here?” Melanie asked at one point.

“Sure!” Rob said, cracking another egg into the frying pan. “I’ve lived here almost all my life. I used to be a street kid, breaking into computer systems for cash, until one day, someone answered my letters to Santa. It was Veronica, actually.”

She smiled. “How about you?” he asked, handing her a bowl of salad. “Do you like your job?”

“Yeah, it’s great,” she said, using the same words and tone he’d used when talking about the Media Relations Center. They both laughed. “It’s not bad. You get to travel a lot, meet a lot of new people.”

They sat down at an empty table. “I get the sense you don’t like it as much as Paul does,” Rob said.

Melanie looked out at the windows. “It’s kind of ironic. He’s the one with the marketing background – he used to work in direct mail - but I always get stuck with the marketing. Maybe he thinks it’s woman’s work.”

“Maybe.” But something else was nagging at Rob now, and he found it hard to concentrate on his dinner conversation with Melanie. Perhaps sensing that, she quickly finished up her meal, said goodbye, and left him in the empty cafeteria.

CRM...marketing...direct mail. Rob sprang to his feet and walked to the CRM Team room. It was deserted. The mice had left through the tiny mouse holes in the side of the room, but



the large workstations were still operating.

Rob sat down at one and quickly bypassed Paul's primitive security. Every now and then he looked up at the diagram on the wall for confirmation, until he realized what was going on.

Not only was this the ideal system for Claus Inc., but it would also provide any direct marketer with names, addresses, and preferences of children all over the world. It would be worth millions to the right person.

Rob heard footsteps in the distance, and the door to the CRM Team room creaked open. He shut down the hacking program he'd run and instead pulled up Paul's CRM implementation timeline.

Rob stared at the screen. This wasn't the official timeline he'd seen in the weekly reports; this was Paul's own private schedule. And there was no way that the project would be ready before next May. No gifts would go out this year.

The footsteps came closer. Rob typed frantically, cursing the fact that there was no company-wide e-mail system yet. The only things he could access were the electronic controls. Then it came to him, and he typed faster than ever before.

A handkerchief smelling of chemicals was pressed over his nose and mouth, and Rob hit the Enter key just before he lost consciousness.

The last thing he heard was Paul Bowman saying, "Thanks to you, I've got another mess to clean up."

* * * *

"I can't believe he'd leave like that," Santa said.

Veronica cupped Santa's head in her hands, and held him against her. "Rob was a troubled kid. Maybe this is his way of acting out. He hasn't been away from the North Pole since he was a teenager."

Santa shook his head. "There's something very wrong here."

He sighed, got to his feet, and rubbed his temples. "Do you think I'm taking it a bit too personally?" he asked.

Veronica hesitated before replying, gently: "It wouldn't surprise me if you did."

Between them, on the coffee table in their lodge, lay Rob's goodbye letter. "He called me a pirate," Santa said, turning the letter over so that he didn't have to look at it. "A thief."

"And you know you're not either."

Santa turned away and looked at the reddish embers in the fireplace. "Maybe that's what's galling me after all this time. First that article in **Breaking Ground Magazine**, and now this."

"We produce toys here that children wouldn't receive otherwise," Veronica said. "If we didn't make them, it's not like the toy companies would lose money."

Santa shrugged and turned around to face her. "That's the standard argument for everyone who goes out and downloads music or software. 'I wouldn't have bought it anyways.' Or 'information wants to be free.' We're in a special position. We can create a million video games or dolls."

Veronica put his hands in hers. "But we don't."

"And once everyone knows what we can do here, all the parents in the world will stop buying their boys and girls toys and let us do it," Santa replied sadly. "You know we can't handle that kind of volume."



“Parents who can won’t ever stop buying their children gifts,” Veronica whispered in his ear. “You know why?”

He shook his head. “Because they love their children,” she said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Santa stood looking down at the letter, unconvinced. “Let’s go outside and turn on the lodge’s Christmas lights,” Veronica said. “That always cheers you up.”

He mustered a smile for her and picked up the remote control from the kitchen counter. They walked out back, beside the hot tub, and looked up at the roof. It being winter year-round, the Claus’s never had to take down their decorations, but they preferred to light them only before Christmas.

Santa pressed the red button on the remote, and watched as the web of lights twinkled on. Then he looked closer. “Do you see what I see?” he asked.

Veronica nodded. The lights on the roof had been reprogrammed to spell out CRM DEAL FAKE: GIFTS WON’T SHIP ON TIME – ROB.

Santa pulled out his cell phone and gave it to Veronica. “You get the elves who were laid off into the lodge. I’m going to find someone else who can help us.”

An hour later, Veronica was serving milk and cookies to 220 grumpy elves, most of whom wanted cider. She was about to try reaching Santa at his office when the door to the lodge opened. Santa walked in, leading Rudolph, who was free from his HAZMAT suit. An elfish cheer went up.

“Christmas is in trouble, people,” Santa said, closing the door. “But I’ve got a plan. Does anyone remember North Pole II?”

* * * *

On December 20th, Paul Bowman took the long way around from the employee quarters to his offices. Along with the new Media Relations Center and the renovations, Paul had managed to cadge enough resources so that his office had become grander and grander, bit by bit. In a few days, he calculated, it would be the largest one on the Claus, Inc. campus.

When Paul opened the door to his office, Santa Claus was sitting in his Aeron chair.

Paul recovered his composure quickly and hung his Gucci parka up on the coat rack. “Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Claus?” he asked smoothly.

Santa tapped his fingers at the reports on Paul’s desk. “I’m worried that we’re not going to meet our Christmas schedule.”

Paul advanced towards Santa, hoping to make him leave his chair. Santa stayed put. “I’ve told you this every week since we’ve started. We had some delays, some cost overruns, but that’s typical of any software project.”

“I did a little research on the Internet,” Santa replied. “70% of all software implementations are late.”

Paul spread his hands wide. “You can rush perfection.”

Santa finally got to his feet. “And you can’t delay Christmas. All of Claus, Inc. is counting on you. If you don’t make the shipping date, nobody will get any gifts on December 25th.”

“I’ll be sure to take that into account,” Paul said easily. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have some work to do.”

Santa walked towards the door. “Oh, one question, Mr. Claus,” Paul asked. “What have you been up to every night for the past couple of weeks?”

Santa turned. “Spending time with my wife, of course. Not that it’s any business of yours.”



Paul smiled. "Of course." He returned to his papers.

"And one question for you, Mr. Bowman," Santa said. "Whatever happened to Rob?"

Paul's fingers froze. "I thought you got a letter from him."

Santa shook his head. "No. No, I didn't."

After Santa had left, Paul picked up the telephone and dialed Melanie. "I want someone to follow Santa Claus tonight," Paul said. "I don't know, maybe put a transmitter on him. Something from our privacy kit."

"I don't feel comfortable doing that, Paul," Melanie replied. He heard her uneasiness through the phone.

"Fine, then I'll find someone who will," Paul said pleasantly, slamming the phone down on the receiver.

That evening, in Santa's office in the Administration building, Santa removed a package from the bottom drawer of his desk. He'd asked Wheeze to make it up in the Production department after hours.

Pressing a button on the package, Santa watched as it quickly inflated into a life-size replica of himself. He put it in position behind the desk so that, to anyone passing by the frosted glass outside, it would look like he was still hard at work.

"Corporate figurehead, indeed," Santa muttered, and left his office, locking the door.

Santa crept through the quiet Administration building and out a side door. The snowmobile he'd requested from Provisioning was waiting for him. Within minutes he was speeding across the frozen tundra towards North Pole II.

North Pole II had been constructed in the mid-1960s at the height of the modern Cold War fears. The Board, fearing that Claus, Inc. might be taken out by a nuclear strike, had built a second Santa's Workshop a sufficient distance away to survive an atomic blast. Santa hadn't had the heart to tell them that he didn't envy any child who would have survived an atomic blast on Christmas, but they'd overruled him. And for once, he was glad.

North Pole II was built like a bunker, embedded in the side of a mountain. Santa pressed the gumdrop keys in the right combination, and the door slid aside. Veronica was there to meet him.

"Paul's suspicious," Santa said.

"I know," Veronica said. "But we have to try."

As they'd done every night, Santa, Veronica, and the downsized elves worked through the wee hours making and packaging gifts...gifts Santa suspected that Paul Bowman's CRM/ERP system was incapable of producing on time.

Even the mice were helping, but their wrapping skills left something to be desired. Often, the mice ended up inside the gift-wrapping, or tied into a bow. At last Veronica gently suggested that they restrain their activities to typing up address labels.

In the morning, Santa and Veronica took the snowmobile back to Claus, Inc. Even before they arrived, Santa knew something was wrong. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

"Production!" Veronica gasped. "It's stopped!"

All these years, they'd become used to the endless thumping, clanking, and grinding noises – not to mention the magical 'whoosh' when a toy would pop into existence. Now they heard nothing but an eerie silence.



“Where’s Paul Bowman?” Santa demanded of the receptionist in the Administration building.

“He’s in with the Board,” the elf replied meekly.

The boardroom seemed colder than usual, but Paul Bowman was wearing an Armani suit and didn’t seem affected at all. Melanie was bundled up and definitely looked unhappy. The Board shared her facial expression.

“What’s going on?” Santa asked as he and Veronica flung the icy doors open and faced them.

Paul stepped forward and held out a sheaf of papers to Santa. “We’ve been served with an injunction.”

Santa took the papers and looked at Claus, Inc.’s legal counsel, Verity. “Explain this.”

Verity looked thoughtful. “The North Pole is under international jurisdiction, so we’ve been served by the United Nations. Under their new Intellectual Property Treaty, we’re in violation of several copyright, patent, and trademark laws.”

“Most of it has to do with you manufacturing copies of toys by Sony, Sega, and other electronics manufacturers out of thin air,” Paul said with a thin smile.

Santa glared at him for a second. “Verity, can you hold this up in court? File some motions, do something so that we can get our gifts out for Christmas?”

Verity shook his elfish head. “They’ve served an injunction that takes effect immediately. If we deliver on December 24th, the companies will be able to recover damages in the amount of all potential losses.” He held up a calculator rimed with frost. “I’ve crunched the numbers. The damages would be about ten times the total net worth of Claus, Inc.”

The Chief Financial Elf nodded in agreement. “Who gave the order to shut down production?” Santa asked.

Nobody answered, but everyone looked in one direction. Santa didn’t even look in Paul’s direction.

Back in Santa’s office, Santa deflated the look-alike and watched Veronica pace. “Paul’s probably the **de facto** Chairman of the Board now,” she said.

Santa looked down at his desk calendar. “Four more days to Christmas Eve. Do you have any ideas?”

“Remember when I said it was all about image and perception?” Veronica asked. “I think I might have one more idea.”



Christmas Eve was traditionally the high point of the year for the North Pole, but this year most people went around with a gloomy expression. The Board feared for its perks, the employees feared for their jobs, and the mice had heard that the cheese was to be cut back to half-rations.

Still, the Media Relations Center gleamed in the dusk, lit by millions of fireflies that danced and flew around the top of its glass dome. On top, the glass Santa waved atop a reindeer-less empty sleigh. The media was arriving by helicopters.

Inside the Media Relations Center, Veronica was rehearsing her speech mentally for the last time when Paul caught up to her. “I can’t believe that Claus, Inc. is going to shut down operations after all these years,” Paul said, sadly. “It’s a real shame.”

“Yes,” Veronica said stiffly, “I can’t believe it either.” Then she swept past him in her vel-



vet cape and strode up to the podium in front of the glass chimney. Elise, having come down with laryngitis, had relinquished the role of public speaker to her.

“Welcome, honored guests, media representatives, and fellow employees!” she said, the acoustics of the Center echoing her booming voice to every corner. “This year, Claus Inc. has a special announcement to make.”

She looked down at Paul. He was almost rubbing his hands with glee. Of course he was, Veronica thought. If Claus, Inc. went under, he’d be able to buy the mailing lists at a pittance, and his consulting firm would become the most powerful direct marketer in the world.

She almost felt sorry for him.

“I have here” – Veronica held up a file folder – “a list of licensing agreements with toy manufacturers around the world.” Paul looked like he was going to faint. “Over the past two weeks we’ve negotiated the right to continue producing and shipping our toys. We’re no longer in violation of the injunction.”

One of the reporters stepped forward. “Why would the toy companies let you make free copies? Won’t they lose money?”

Veronica smiled. “It seems that not everyone buys the RIAA and MPAA’s views. We’re only shipping toys to needy children whose parents wouldn’t be buying them anyways. The toy companies say they’ve been enjoying sales of add-on products all these years, too.” She held up a tiny sticker. “Oh, and one more thing. These stickers are going out on every toy. In case you can’t read it, they say ‘DON’T STEAL TOYS.’”

At that moment she heard the tinkling of jingle bells, and Veronica and the audience looked out the glass walls of the Center to see Santa pull up in his sleigh piled high with gifts produced in North Pole II. The sleigh even had a full complement of reindeer – Rudolph’s nose was covered with a mesh radiation shield, just in case, but it glowed as brightly as ever.

As the press and employees applauded, Paul shouted “NO!” It sounded like a man drowning, or being torn apart. Before anyone could react, Paul sprinted for the exit. The snowmobiles, Veronica thought. He can block Santa from reaching the airstrip!

Paul leapt onto a snowmobile and revved it. At the same time, Santa started his run toward the airstrip. But Veronica could see that Santa would be too late. Paul rammed his snowmobile into the side of the sleigh, which disintegrated into wooden fragments, the reindeer scattering. The audience let out an audible gasp, almost a moan.

“Nothing to worry about, folks,” Santa said, striding in, all smiles. Paul raced in after him, looking like a wild man.

“He has to be stopped!” Paul shouted. “Someone has to stop him!”

“Nobody ever stops Christmas,” Santa said. Then, brushing past Veronica and giving her a kiss on the cheek, he walked over to the glass chimney and placed a finger aside his nose. And before the assembled guests, up the glass chimney he slowly rose.

“I’ll stop him!” Paul shouted, but someone grabbed him from behind and restrained him. It was Melanie.

“Give it up already, Paul,” she said. “I don’t want to get a lump of coal for Christmas.”

Santa had reached the roof of the Media Relation Center, and he removed the glass Santa and got into the giant glass sleigh.

“It’s a fake!” Paul cried. “It won’t work!”



“Actually, it will,” Veronica said. “We had it made to spec when the architects were building the Center.”

Santa flew the sleigh gradually down to the ground, where 220 downsized elves quickly packed it with wrapped gifts and harnessed the reindeer.

Then he gave a wave, and the reindeer, sleigh, Santa, and all taxied down the airstrip runway and soared into the night.

“I don’t know if information wants to be free or not,” they heard Santa call out from the sleigh, “but I know Christmas gifts certainly do.”

* * * *

They found Rob on Christmas Day, buried under the pile of junk mail with a breathing tube Paul had thoughtfully provided. Although Rob babbled for a few days about mortgage refinancing, valuable coupons, and two-for-one pizza, Melanie managed to nurse him back to health.

Claus Inc.’s Board of Directors apologized to Santa for what they’d done. Mostly, they were relieved that the company was safe and that they hadn’t been dismissed (the prospects for jockeys and Tallahassee tunnel-workers being worse than expected).

Santa didn’t quite go back to the old ways – he acknowledged that some of the innovations were useful, especially the CRM system, once all the bugs had been worked out.

And everyone lived happily ever after...well, almost everybody.

Every year at Christmas, Paul Bowman gets a lump of coal in his stocking. And every year at Christmas, Paul Bowman gets a visit from a special elf consultant named Wheeze who’s ready and willing to tell him just what Bowman Consulting is doing wrong.

THE END