

1.

During a period of economic crisis, Santa Claus had to look for a second job.

He was a seasonal worker – working only at Christmas time – and although what he did was full-on, exhausting and extremely important, it also meant he could slack (slipper-mode) for the rest of the year. January to November was one long holiday.

What music to his ears! Holidays!

When he was a child, he'd always dreamed of finding a job that would give him a lot (seriously a lot) of spare time.

So, what did he do the rest of the year?

Well, he read books, watched television, played cards with his friends, took the reindeer for walks.

He'd also renew his gym membership every year, thinking he might lose some weight, but somehow it never quite worked out.

As you can imagine, he had a hearty appetite and was an excellent cook.

In other words, Santa Claus was a bit of a lazybones. He enjoyed the easy life and had no wife or children to look after. Which was a bit of a contradiction, considering lots of people called him "Father Christmas" as well.

2

Times had changed unfortunately.

The International Postal Service was in the red. That doesn't mean all the workers dressed in red, it means the Postal Service had run out of money. It was actually much worse. It owed lots and lots of money to lots of people and Santa Claus hadn't received a salary for three years for the important home delivery service he provided.

He couldn't retire even though he was a good old age by then.

But hard times had set in and the International Postal Service announced it would no longer be taking on new employees.

Every year, thousands of aspiring young Santa Clauses would routinely turn up at the Postal Service's employment office, creating the most enormous queue that snaked all the way round the imposing building.

They didn't have to bring a CV to be taken on, though. There were only three requirements:

1. Have a long beard
2. Weigh at least 100 kg

(then came the most important requirement of all, the reason most aspiring Santas would be rejected...)

3. Be kind and generous.

Truly kind and generous. Not trying to, not sort of, but properly kind.

It was easy to check the first two requirements. The director just had to look at the applicant and ask him to step onto the scales. The third one was a bit trickier.

3

Admittedly, the most unkind and ungenerous of all was the International Postal Service itself.

The Super Director never gave the workers a permanent contract, the most some of them could hope for was project work, one night only, as "Santa's helpers" on the night between the 24th and 25th of December.

This caused an even bigger problem. It meant Santa had to work with new, inexperienced helpers every year and never got the chance to teach them the job properly.

And what a lot of trouble they caused, the helpers.

Firstly, they'd send the parcels to all the wrong people provoking floods of tears and uncontrollable hiccupping.

Then, having only recently passed their driving test, they made a mess of steering the reindeer, getting them tangled up in the branches of trees and mixed up in overhead power lines, which was also very dangerous.

Sometimes they'd bank too quickly right or left and the parcels would tumble out of the sleigh. Embarrassing storms or parcel-sized hailstones had already been featured on the weather news two years in a row.

So, despite having lots of helpers, Santa Claus ended up having to do most of the work himself.

These were lean times indeed and lean times were not Santa Claus' cup of tea at all.

4

To make things worse, there was also the problem of the reindeer. Santa Claus only had two— Alice and Felice - in his garage.

All the others, more than one hundred, he had to hire.

Hire charges were rising and the price of carrots was going up every year, too.

As if that weren't bad enough, the few days they were on duty, the reindeers ate like giant piggies.

Then there was the sleigh insurance, the sleigh tax, the sleigh wash and the hoof maintenance. Santa Claus paid an expert team for this service and had invested in more than one hundred pairs of slippers to keep the reindeers' hooves warm while they were resting.

Without maintenance, all sorts of things could go wrong.

Sometimes Santa Claus would have nightmares and wake up in a sweat, having dreamt about tragically portentous front-page headlines:

Santa Claus's sleigh plummets from sky, old man miraculously survives but children's gifts all lost.

He sincerely hoped not!

How could the situation have gotten so bad?

The answer lay in the children's letters. Until not so long ago, they'd been full of timid, modest wishes that could be easily fulfilled. Sometimes all it took was a simple gesture, a small object, a promise.

Only now they'd turned into lists, never-ending lists. That's what had pushed the International Postal Service into the red.

5

It was November and Christmas was approaching.

Santa Claus was normally a cheery, positive person but he would now fall in the depths of despair for long spells at a time. He wasn't himself at all.

He also had a recurring nightmare: that he'd be replaced by a robot. Or worse still, by an army of remote-controlled drones operated from a computer.

He'd wake up shaking.

"Drones delivering presents?" he'd mutter to himself, indignantly. "Delivering presents is not a mission for the military!"

But he was in for a big surprise.

The Super Director of the Postal Service made the announcement on the news. "We need to lower costs, and more importantly, we need faster deliveries. And more streamlined requests. Stop with the letters! We'll be taking bullet-pointed wish lists sent in from mobile devices from now on."

Santa Claus nearly jumped out his chair!

"No, this can't be happening!" he cried, getting angrier by the minute. "This...this means there'll be no more "Dear Santa's, Happy Christmas, Best Wishes, and I love you's.."

What's more, in their letters, the children used to tell me all about their families, their friends, the things they love doing. They ask me about the reindeers... all that's going to disappear!"

Santa Claus went pale.

He loved the children's letters. The very special ones were kept in a box under his bed and he'd take them out and re-read them frequently during his eleven-month holiday.

"I'll write a letter of protest!" he exclaimed.

But by an unexpected quirk of fate, it was Santa who received a letter that same day. When he opened it, he realized it had been written on a computer and in the bottom left, it bore the signature (completely illegible though) of the Super Director of the Postal Service himself. Santa scanned the letter quickly. He hardly dared to breath and his heart lurched – it was a letter of dismissal. He'd been sacked!

[Letter of Dismissal

With reference to.....

To:

Mr Santa Claus

7 Playful Elf Street]