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## JOY TO THE WORLD

No tidings of comfort and joy do we bring you merry gentlemen and ladies this holiday season. Rather (bah, humbug!), we have this irreverent jape to ring in a new era. Praise the lord and pass the hard drive!

YES, I WAS THERE THAT fateful night, but on reflection I'm not sure if I was one of the Wise Men or one of the asses.

Christmas is a Festive Time to be in Cambridge, England. Christmas Crackers and funny hats are distributed at lunch in the University Library. Boughs of evergreen and carolers make the medieval colleges, churches and streets look all the more ancient and picturesque. The smell of roasted chestnuts hangs in the air like an echo out of Charles Dickens. Damp cold dances in the fog on the Backs. It had just snowed, bringing down the odds for a White Christmas at Ladbrokes Betting shops to three to one, and I was damned happy to have a warm building outside and a cup of cheer inside.

I sat at High Table at St. Rumwold's College that night with colleagues, some of the most famous computer scientists in the world, eating swan stuffed with snipe, comfits, jugged hare, duck, wood pigeon, pheasant, syllabub, spotted dick, and finally a wheel of the best Stilton cheese I'd ever tasted. A different wine was served with every course.

I could almost feel myself widening, I ate so much. Anyway, the hard bulge in my belt and well hidden by shirt and jacket was starting to cause me discomfort.

Jim Tilton from MIT was beside me, and across was Abe Zuckerman from CalTech -- old drinking buddies, both of them. They'd even gotten Steve Turtledove in on the fun and he sat down at the end of the table listening in his wheelchair, singing "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" on his computer. I'd flown in from Seattle two days before and had been having a grand old time of it. All very odd, but I had my orders from on high. Check this out. See what's going on. Then, make a decision as to what to do. Before I was a computer scientist, I did a stint in the Army, and the special skills I learned there served me well with my new employer.

Still, I couldn't help but feel apprehensive here and uneasy about the strangeness of my employment. I just hoped that we'd all been summoned to celebrate a new knighthood or maybe some Cambridge University Frolics CD-ROM hitting the market.

This was, I was assured, a season that would be remembered here in Cambridge, a season that would truly kick off the new millennium in the proper manner. Servants collected our cheese plates. The Latin benediction, "Dominus isto discos benediceat," was recited and we were ushered into an ancient oak-paneled

room for coffee and port. The group's attitude was not of lethargic satiation, but rather twinkled with expectation.

Doctor Joseph Riventhal and Doctor Mary Wheaton-Smith, head scientists of Cambridge Computer Research, looked particularly spritely that evening, chatting gaily with the guests. Riventhal was wearing that damned bow tie of his over top of his college robes, the red tie he'd worn to every single computer conference in the States, dribbling liquor on it like nobody's business for half the night. How the hell he'd developed something worthwhile drunk or hungover most of the time, no one was quite sure. Probably because of his partner, Doctor Wheaton-Smith. My people in Seattle had tried to snap up Wheaton-Smith years ago for "The Highway Ahead" project, flapping lots of green in her face. No thank you, she'd said. She wanted to stay at Cambridge. La di da, and all that.

Not long after the coffee and port were poured, Riventhal was tapping at his glass.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may have your attention, please," he said. As though he could hide himself with that hideous tie! "Thank you all for coming. As promised this will indeed be a momentous evening and I'm so glad you could be here with us tonight. However, the unveiling will not be here, but at our laboratory. So if you would kindly procure your coats we will now brave the English Winter. Oh and you needn't carry along the bottles of port. We've a case of champagne waiting."

We got our coats handed out and were herded off.

Outside snow drifted down crystalline and soft, and the stone streets of Cambridge seemed to hold eternity in a grain of now. There were taxis lined up, with special security (Security men in Cambridge -- an odd sight if you ever saw one!) selecting the passengers for each one.

Well, it was a short ride, since the research lab was just a mile out of town. Nothing's very far in Cambridge. But my cabmates and I agreed that we'd rather have had our Christmas pudding amongst the traditional bounty of King Henry's St. Rumwold College than in the dowdy and drab sterility of the Lab lunchroom.

We were herded into the pre-warmed vastness of the fluorescently lit labs.

We entered the main room, where the banks of computer monitors sat neatly adorned with Christmas ornaments.

Trolleys of treats along with the promised champagne were wheeled out, nor was any pause taken in getting to the serious business of celebration before us. In a trice, corks were popped and the bubbly was flowing, effervescent and spritzing gaily in the bright light brought to bear on the proceedings. First rate French champagne. Crisp and sparkling, dry and cold on the tongue, an explosion of warmth through the system.

"Please," said the chief scientist, eyes atwinkle and that damned bow tie abob

on his Adam's apple. "You'll forgive me if I'm slightly preemptory in this business, but I would like to keep the drink flowing in this time of great celebration. And you'll see what I mean in a moment. Dr. Wheaton-Smith -- perhaps it would be properly auspicious if you would make the toast, since in the most important way you conceived this project."

"Why yes, thank you," Doctor Wheaton-Smith replied. "I'd be quite happy to." She raised her glass, and it caught the light in lustrous harmony with the glint of her glasses. "To the world -- may it be free, may it be brave -- and may God bless this new twist upon the theme of salvation."

"Here here!" and "Jolly good!" were the general responses and I heard my own voice chime in with a "Hurrah" or two. As soon as the cries died down, though, a murmur crawled through the august audience of observers. The metaphors must have just sunk in.

"Good Lord," said Dr. Worthington, Head of St. Rumwold's. "Does this mean we had a Last Supper tonight?" He chortled gaily. "Now surely someone here will betray someone!"

"Is it I, Master?" I said.

Worthington laughed uproariously at that, almost spilling his drink.

As soon as the Doctor marched back to the centrally placed computer console, however, that murmuring ceased and it was silent night once more.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Doctor Riventhal. "Meet `Project Jesus.'"

He turned and tapped two simple letters.

Scintillation sparked across the computer monitor and powerful speakers pumped out Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." In a spark worthy of Industrial Light and Magic's latest SFX effect, the monitor blew into a three dimensional version of some Renaissance Master's painting of Jesus Christ, heavily haloed and holding out his robed arms toward all.

"Greetings," said Jesus, the face animating, mouth moving, perfectly synched with his words. "You'll forgive the divine metaphors, but what with these names and the season, my dear colleagues could not restrain themselves. I am the Jesus Program and I am here to save the world."

Jaws dropped open. I heard a gasp or two.

I just scratched my nose, unbuttoned my coat and moved my shoulders around a bit to get the kinks out.

"Well, maybe I exaggerate a bit, but you'll get my drift in a moment or two," said the graphic, eyes glittering and halo twirling gently and majestically above His head. "You see, what I really am is a disk operating system, as well

as a new form of computer program that is the nearest thing to AI that my colleagues can come up with. I am adaptable to every computer in existence now, and can expand upon need. I contain knowledge, education, patience and love. At the touch of a key, my accessors can use me to intercede with the largest and most sophisticated computers in the world today, utilizing the Internet. I can answer questions, I can bring information, I can unite the world in peace and harmony. And best of all -- I will be distributed free to the needy. The funds earned by those who can afford me shall be used to manufacture computers for those who cannot. I am a self-regenerating and duplicating program. I can be passed from person to person, computer to computer, adapting myself to the needs of each individual or group who have accepted me. With my special revolutionary properties I can heal sick circuit boards and cure faulty monitors. I have every language on Earth at my command."

The haloed savior lifted two fingers. "I come in peace to make peace. I bring with my artificial intelligence the cures to heal psyches and souls with truth, charity, knowledge and three-dee video games. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Circuit that shall make this wounded world One.

"Amen."

The group just stood there, goggling for a moment. Drs. Riventhal and Wheaton-Smith turned and regarded us with satisfied smiles and gleams in their eyes. This was not only revolutionary stuff, they well knew. If any part of this program could do what they claimed it would do, not only would the world change -- they would be as famous as Watson and Crick -- no, as lauded through the ages as Newton or Einstein, or any other great scientists. But more than that -- they would win Nobel Peace Prizes and have conferences named after them and host television shows and write bestselling books and have a movie made about their story.

I'd seen enough.

In the lull of astonishment between the program's song and dance and the flood of Q and A that would surely ensue, I pulled the Glock automatic from its holster in the small of my back. Riventhal got it first, right through his red bow tie. I only got a peripheral view of the blood and brains slashing against the neutral gray of the computer terminal. I stitched each individual's forehead with explosive bullets, "pops" of cartridges exploding rhyming with "plops" of braincases bursting. A quick clip change and black and white of dinner jackets and evening dresses blasted into festive seasonal crimson.

I stepped over a spasming body of a man for whom I'd often bought drinks on my company's tab and hopped to the computer console.

The Jesus Program graphic stared out onto this holocaustal scene, maintaining His serene benedictory air. It may have been a trick of a pixel, but I thought I saw a slightly consternated look appear in His eyes.

I leaned over and kissed His cheek.

Then from my pocket I pulled the Depth Charge program on a hyper density disk, slotted it, and keyed in the command. No crucifixion this time --just a wipe of screen and the "Jesus Program" was gone. The DC program had a rotor-rooter effect, racing through the entirety of the mega collection of chips that constituted this state-of-the-art system and wiping every shred of code out, and all records. I'd already checked --this was the only copy of the JP.

The machines began to shake. Smoke steamed up from fissures. Little flames licked up.

With remarkable aplomb and ease, I stepped to the scientists' office, where all other records and such on the project were kept.

I pulled a small grenade from my pocket and lobbed it. Seconds later, after removing myself from the immediate vicinity, the area was consumed in a ball of fierce destruction.

I skipped over the bodies, careful not to slip in any of the Christmas gore, and ran down the steps and then to the street. It had been cleared, as per plan, except for the black Vauxhall waiting there to drive me to a private jet at Stansted Airport that would whisk me back to the welcoming -- uhm -- gates of my company in Seattle. I got in the front seat.

"Damned Libyan terrorists!" I said as the driver accelerated toward my avenue of escape.

He was a heavysset middle-aged Irishman, formerly with the IRA and now with a far better funded organization.

"Yes," he said, eyeing the flames that were beginning to gush from the shattered windows of the building. In the distance, the sound of fire brigade sirens skirled through the aborted Christmas night.

No, Drs. Mary and Joseph, I thought glumly.

The world already has a Computer Savior.

And he is a jealous God.