

PRESENT PLAN

It was an unusual request, but it was only November, so Father Christmas had time and knew what to do. Instead of sending a shelf-elf to pick a present from the racks in his cavernous Lapland storage centre, he took his phone from a pocket in his well padded red jacket, wrote some emails and made some calls.

Half an hour later, he leant back in his reclining chair with a cup of tea and two large biscuits. He swiped his phone screen once. A printer groaned and wheezed in the corner of his office. Sheets of paper fell to the floor. An elf picked them up and put them in an envelope.

Father Christmas thought he really must fix the paper collection tray. Perhaps in January when life was quieter? Maybe he could automate stuffing envelopes at the same time, even if it did upset the elves – who enjoyed licking the peanut butter flavoured gum on the envelopes.

Scents and size

Fast forward a month or so to the dark o'clock hours of December 25th, Father Christmas has left the envelope (and a hefty pile of presents) under the tree in Frank's house. The living room is ankle deep in torn (thanks to Frank and Northwick) and shredded (thanks to Elvis the dog) wrapping paper. The boy and the bear are sitting cross-legged on the floor, sifting through paper and presents.

Northwick judged presents by taste and smell: he adored the mouth-melting aroma of his chocolate selection box, the spicy scent of cinnamon honey almonds and the tantalising tang of melting snowman cookies. On the other nostril, the ginger and grapefruit perfumed soap-on-a-rope made him sneeze. And one nibble showed Northwick that soap was definitely not edible.

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Frank preferred big, bright and noisy. The yellow and green fire extinguisher-sized water-pistol. The sparkling silver and gold electronic drum kit. But fire-arms were banned indoors. And the drum kit had become mysteriously silent after Grandpa took it apart to find out, so he said, "how it worked".

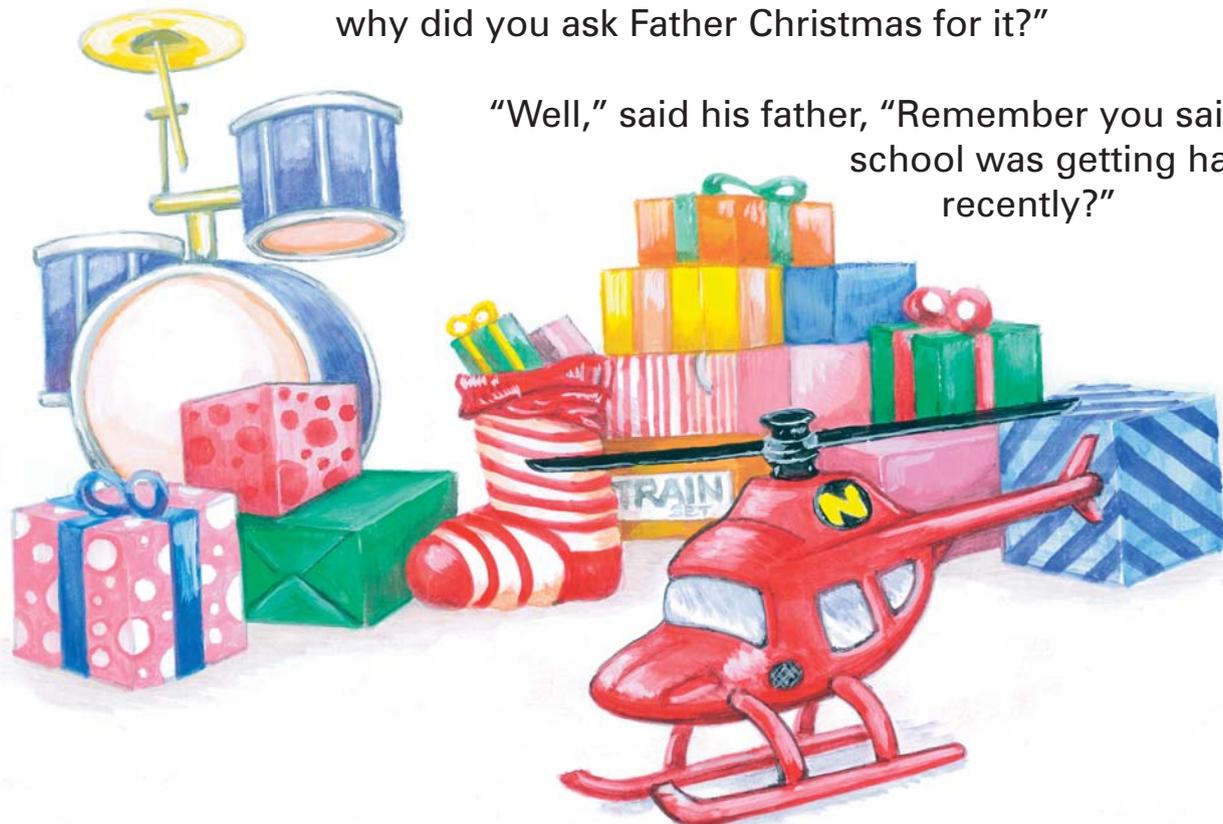
Frank picked up a tiny toy helicopter. Annoyingly, he couldn't see how to fit the batteries in the remote control. So he turned to his parents for help and noticed that of all things on Christmas Day they were reading what looked like a letter. "What's that?" he asked in astonishment.

"It's a letter we wanted from Father Christmas," Frank's father replied. "In fact, it's a plan. It will make all the difference when you go back to school and make you and us much, much happier."

Frank dropped the helicopter. He knew toys could make you happy. But how could a letter make anyone happy? "What's a plan?" he asked. "Can you see it, or hear it?" And Northwick joined in: "Or smell it, or taste it?"

Frank's mother thought for a moment. Then she said Frank and Northwick made plans every day without thinking about it. When they got up in the morning, for example, they knew what they wanted to do. That was a plan. Frank still looked puzzled. "So, what's special about this plan? And why did you ask Father Christmas for it?"

"Well," said his father, "Remember you said that school was getting harder recently?"



Pulling strings

Frank nodded glumly. As he got older, school got harder. There was more work and less play. The print in his books was smaller. In fact everything in the classroom was harder to see. That made him tired -- even angry and frustrated sometimes. And he knew he wasn't always on his best behaviour when he felt like that.

But Frank also knew it wasn't his fault. Surely grown-ups understood he didn't see the same as they did? And because of that he sometimes made mistakes and even appeared to misbehave. But he didn't – what was the word? – **plan** to make mistakes or misbehave. It was simply because he couldn't see so well.

“We asked Father Christmas,” his father went on, “because he's good at persuading people. He put your teachers in touch with eye experts and grown-ups who – like you – live with wobbly eyes every day. They wrote this plan together so everyone understands what it's like to see through your eyes.”

Frank looked thoughtful. “So you mean my teachers will know I'm not being naughty. It's just that I can't see they are talking to me or I can't read what's on the board?” he asked.

“Exactly,” replied his mother. “Now that's all clear why don't you and Northwick go back to your presents while we go to the kitchen and sort out Christmas dinner?”

At this point, Northwick, whose ears had been twitching intently, asked loudly: “So! Going to the kitchen and sorting out Christmas dinner – is that a plan?”

Frank's mother smiled and said: “Yes, Northwick, that definitely is a plan. And I'm guessing you'd agree that it's a good plan.”

Northwick nodded and looked very pleased with himself now that he understood plans. “In that case, I'll join you in the kitchen. You'll need a food expert – like me – to taste things and make sure that dinner goes according to my – I mean your – plan!”

**In memory of Steve McKay, Volunteer Press Officer and Trustee
of the Nystagmus Network between 2009 - 2016.**