

Yuletide Conversation and Replimat Lunches

By Ash Hulme

"So, Doctor. What is this thing that so many of my human customers just cannot stop talking about? Everyone seems to be in such a state these days, almost as if the Gratitude Festival had come several months before it's due. Is today somehow meant to be... *special*?"

"You mean Christmas?"

"Why, yes. That's the word I've been hearing lately. So how about telling me all about this tradition of yours? Is it some kind of celebration?"

"A religious festival, in part. But it's more than that. Once every year, if you reckon by the Terran calendar, people go out of their way to rejoin their families. Exchange gifts. Feast. And children get a visit from Santa Claus."

"What's a Santaclaus?"

"Not 'what' - *who*. He's an old man who delivers presents to children."

"Ah. Rather like an annual courier service."

"If you like. He comes into their rooms at night and leaves toys at the end of their beds."

"The children's rooms?"

"Yes..."

"So what you're telling me is, there is an elderly man sneaking into children's bedrooms, while the family sleeps. And their parents do not see a problem with this at all?"

"I... er... I guess not. But it's really only a..."

"Does this happen to every Human in the galaxy?"

"Not *every* Human. Just the ones who celebrate this tradition. The well behaved ones, at least."

"Well I can certainly see how that would considerably lighten the old man's workload. But even so... How long would he take to deliver all of these gifts?"

"A night."

"One night? Just *one*?"

"Of course. On Christmas Eve..."

"And how *does* he manage to break into all these places?"

"No-one *breaks* in, Garak. He *gets* in through the chimney."

"Chim... Ney?"

"A sort of cylindrical... uh... *funnel*. They were supposed to direct the smoke of hearth fires into the air, away from people's homes, and... What?"

"Oh, nothing of consequence. I just find it fascinating to consider some of what your people are willing to believe."

"I never said that I believed it."

"But you might once have done, mightn't you, Doctor?"

"I might have. When I was very small, but that's not the point..."

"Consider this point, then. Shall we at least assume that there are no fires lit when this elderly man-"

"-Santa Claus."

"When Santaclaus enters these Humans' living space?"

"I suppose not. But there are hardly any homes left that would still have chimneys, anyway."

"How does he get in, then?"

"He... Look Garak, *I* don't know."

"All right. Then how about this? Assuming that there are several hundred Humans at least in every Federation colony in the Quadrant, or even two thirds of your Federation settlements. We can safely suppose by extension that the vast majority of these outposts would have Human children, can we not?"

"That sounds fair."

"I'm glad to hear it. But in any case, to travel to every one of these colonies in a single night - even if he were not obliged to stop at so many houses along the way - this... Santaclaus would need to travel at hundreds of times warp speed..."

"Thousands, actually, but I think you're missing the point..."

"But that's *exactly* the point. To get to all those places so quickly, he must either be a time traveller - in which case I'm sure Temporal Investigations would have a thing or two to say about his activities, or have access to the most incredible transport technology ever invented. I for one would love to get a look inside this old man's ship."

"It's not a ship."

"What, then?"

"He has... a sleigh. A kind of moving cart. Pulled by flying reindeer."

"What's a reindeer?"

"An animal."

"With wings?"

"No, of course not. Why would they have...?"

"How else would they be able to fly?"

"Well. Uh... People say... That is... uh... It's... Listen, this can't be of any real interest to you. Perhaps you'd rather we change the subject..."

"Oh not at all. I'm really quite fascinated."

"All right. What I'm saying, is that *I'd* actually rather change the subject."

"What a shame. But please, Doctor. Humour me. You wouldn't leave a story half told?"

"Oh, very well. The vehicle, flying animals, everything. It's all... magic."

"...*Magic*."

"Garak - the whole thing is just a children's story. Really. Nothing more complicated than that. And to be perfectly frank, I'm beginning to wish I'd never told you in the first place."

"Magic."

"And besides, it's a big universe, isn't it?"

"That's true, I suppose."

"Stranger things have happened after all."

"They certainly have, Doctor. They certainly have."