***WILL THE REAL FATHER CHRISTMAS PLEASE STAND UP!***

A short story by Veronica Heley

Ten year old Joe spent a lot of time thinking about things. For a start, he was worried about there being so many Father Christmases around. His Mum and Dad assured him that there was indeed a Father Christmas and that he would be bringing Joe an X-box for Christmas. His older brother and his friends at school told him that was a load of baloney and that it was just a man dressed up in a beard and red clothes. They laughed at him when he said that if his parents told him there was one, then there must be one somewhere, if not in Ealing, then somewhere in London.

Joe decided to carry out a scientific experiment to settle the matter. He’d seen posters about three different Father Christmases who would be visiting the neighbourhood that weekend. The biggest and brightest posters promised that Father Christmas would be coming with his reindeer to Ealing Broadway Centre, a second said he could be visited in his grotto in a department store nearby, and in the afternoon there was going to be a Santa at his school Christmas Fete. Surely, thought Joe, one of those would be the real thing.

Joe’s money was on the one with the reindeer, but he had an open mind about it as any man of science should. He resolved to note his findings in his notebook and only then would he make up his mind.

His Mum said she was going to have a coffee in the Broadway and did he want to come, so said ‘Yes please, so long as I can see Santa when he arrives.’

Sure enough, there was quite a crowd to see Father Christmas and when he arrived Joe was convinced that he must be the real thing. He looked right. He had a hearty laugh, and best of all, the reindeer were really real. Father Christmas opened his sack and threw some sweeties into the crowd and everyone whooped and dived for them . . . except Joe.

Sweeties were all very well, he thought. They didn’t cost very much. He did the mental arithmetic and came up with a figure which meant that even he, a ten year old boy, could have afforded to treat the children that way. This Father Christmas wasn’t giving out X-boxes or anything worthwhile, was he? What’s more, Joe observed that he wasn’t wearing proper snow boots, but black trainers, which rather gave the show away. Joe made a note about that in his little book.

Joe’s mother was meeting her friend at the cafe in the department store next door. Santa’s Grotto was right by the cafe, and sure enough there was already a queue of children with their parents, waiting to see this Father Christmas. Joe’s mother asked if he would like something to drink. He said he rather see Father Christmas, so she said that was all right but he must come back straight after. And she put a couple of pounds in his hand.

Joe went to join the queue. He noticed that there was a girl dressed in an elf costume with fake ears stopping people at the entrance to the grotto, and taking money from them. Joe thought about it. He wasn’t at all sure that elves existed, but they certainly wouldn’t put on false ears when they had their own pointed ones already. Joe didn’t like those false ears.

What’s more, didn’t Father Christmas come to give presents to good children? So why should Joe have to pay to see him? Joe thought about the situation. With the money in his pocket, he could buy his Mum a big bar of the dark chocolate she adored, or he could spend it on going to see Father Christmas. His curiosity was great, but those false ears put him off.

A classmate of his came out of the grotto carrying a cheap plastic toy. Was that rubbish all that Santa gave away? Joe made another note in his little book and bought his Mum the chocolate.

They went home to have a snack lunch before going to the School Fete in the afternoon. Surely his third Father Christmas would be the real one?

The fete was buzzing with people and Joe had to wait some time to see this Father Christmas, but when he reached the entrance, he detected the well-known booming voice of their maths teacher coming from behind Father Christmas’s beard!

Joe was so disgusted he told his mother he was going home early. She didn’t argue. He’d long been used to taking himself to and from school by himself.

Joe didn’t go straight home. He sat on a seat in the Lane and grumped to himself. His scientific experiment had failed. There was no Father Christmas. It was all a con by adults. A fairy story. Hadn’t his brother told him so?

Knowing this didn’t make him feel better, but worse.

There was a shriek of brakes and a horrid scream.

A toddler had dropped his teddy bear in crossing the road with his mother . . . and had broken away from her in effort to retrieve it.

A bus loomed . . .

An elderly man came from nowhere to snatch up the child and throw her onto the pavement . . .

The bus stopped dead. Cries of alarm.

The man had been knocked over, but got himself upright, and limped to the bench on which Joe was sitting. ‘I’m all right. Is the child all right?’

The child was perfectly all right, once she’d been reunited with her teddy bear. The mother was profuse in her thanks, offered to take the man to the hospital to be looked at . . . and he refused. He even gave her some money to buy something for the child for Christmas.

The bus moved on. The mother and child moved on. Traffic resumed.

The man sitting beside Joe was not young. He had no beard and he was wearing ordinary clothes.

The skies cleared and the sun came out.

Joe said, ‘You are the real Father Christmas. Have you come a long way today?’

The man shook his head. ‘I used to live here. I’m just visiting.’

‘You’re going home soon?’

The man gave a twisted smile. ‘Yes. I hope so. Very soon.’

Joe said, ‘I expect you’re looking forward to it.’

The man nodded. ‘Yes, I am.’

Joe said, ‘When I’m grown up, I’m going to be a Father Christmas, too. Maybe I’ll be a doctor. That takes years. Maybe I’ll travel, to help people. And then I’ll go home when the job’s done.’

Did Joe get it right?