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Frank Brennan
Excerpt
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Spam

Time: five years from now
Place: England



‘Oh no!’ said Joe Turner. ‘When I go on the computer, all I get is spam – email that nobody wants. It’s all from people who are trying to sell you things. Email which is trying to get

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money from you. Email that says it can help your love life. Email that says it can make you rich. It's just stupid! And do I ask for any of it? No! It's all spam, spam, spam! I can't get emails from my friends and from my work because I've got too much spam. All I get is spam, spam and more spam! It takes a long time to get spam off my computer too. Sometimes I lose important emails because I get so angry!

'Dad, don't get angry,' said Louise, his daughter. She loved her father. He made her laugh, but he didn't like computers. They made him angry. 'Everybody gets spam, Dad. There's nothing we can do about it. Just live with it,' Louise said.

'It's easy for you, Louise,' Joe answered. 'You're a teenager. Fourteen-year-old girls all use computers these days. You know all about them. But not me. I remember when there was no spam. I can even remember when we didn't have a computer. Oh, happy days!'

'Dad, I live with spam, that's all. Everybody lives with it now. I don't know why you don't. Mum does.'

Joe laughed. 'Ha! You know why? She doesn't use the computer much. That's why. And what does she do when something goes wrong on the computer? She asks one of us to do something about it. Remember last week? She opened some spam and it had a virus! You can't use a computer when there's a virus on it. We worked for hours to make it OK again.'

'What do you mean, *we*?' said Louise. 'You mean me, Dad. You just watched. I did all the work.'

'I was there to help,' replied Joe with big, open eyes. 'I'm always there to help you. You know that.'

'Thanks, Dad,' Louise answered with a smile. 'That's good to know.'

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Two weeks later, Joe looked at the news on the internet and ate his breakfast. His wife, Inez, was there with Louise. It was eight o'clock in the morning.

'Yes!' he shouted. 'They did it! This is what we need!'

Inez often heard her husband shout when he read the news. 'What did they do, Joe?' she asked.

'Computer experts can stop spam!' laughed Joe. 'That's what they say in the news. And the good thing is – it isn't going to cost us anything! The computer experts say spam's going to stop. Isn't that great?'

Louise sat up. 'Just a minute, Dad. Do you mean that we aren't going to find spam on the computer again? And we don't need to pay anything? That's really good! But how can they do that?'

'I don't know,' said Joe. 'Is it going to work? That's the important thing!'

Inez looked happy, too. She didn't like computers, but she *hated* spam!

Joe and his family hated spam. But it wasn't only them. There were many people everywhere who hated it too. Millions of them got the free software and used it to stop spam. It worked. People only got the emails that they wanted. Everybody was happy. Spam was gone.

That's what they thought.

* * *

Louise went on a camping holiday with her school friends. 'No more computers or television for three weeks! What am I going to do?' she laughed.

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When Louise was on holiday, her parents heard some news about a new internet shopping company. This company sold everything. ‘Wait for emails from our internet company. Our prices are cheap and there’s something for everybody. We’re the best internet shopping company in the world!’ said the person on the television.

That evening, Joe and Inez read the emails from the internet shopping company. Lots of people from all over England read the emails. Everyone wanted the cheap prices.

Three weeks later

‘Now why did you buy that?’ asked Joe Turner.

Inez looked at her new salad bowl and put it on the kitchen table. There were four more bowls on the table. They were all the same.

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‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But when I see a salad bowl like this, I want to buy it. I feel bad when I don’t. I don’t know why. Funny, isn’t it?’

‘What, more things for the garden, Dad?’ laughed Louise. She was at home again, after her holiday. ‘Our flat’s on the fourth floor, remember? There’s no garden here!’



‘I just forget when I see them,’ said Joe. ‘I can’t stop. I want to buy them all the time!’

And that wasn’t all. Joe and Inez had lots of other things, too. They didn’t need any of them. Louise saw that. But it

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didn't stop her parents. There was shopping everywhere in the flat. Louise knew something was wrong. But what?

It was the same everywhere. People bought all kinds of things, things they didn't want or need.

'This is stupid,' everyone said. Then they bought something too. No one knew how to stop. Shopping was the only thing people talked about – in the street, on the news.



People started to feel afraid. Everybody spent too much money. Doctors, scientists, politicians all talked about it. Some people thought it was a new virus.

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And was it? Nobody knew. But people shopped online all the time now. They didn't have the money to pay for their shopping. But that didn't stop them. People spent money they didn't have, and they just bought too much. Soon, their houses were too small for the hundreds of things that they bought. Many of these things never came out of their boxes.

* * *

'What is going on?' Louise asked herself. 'Now I'm home from my holiday, and everything is different. Something is wrong. But what?'

Louise went to the computer to read her emails. When she was on holiday, she didn't use the computer. But she knew that her parents read their emails every day. Was there some important news that she didn't know about?

Inez saw Louise sit down at the computer.

'Can I look?' asked Inez. 'I'm waiting for an email.'

'OK, Mum,' said Louise. She got up, but she stayed next to her mother. Inez opened her emails. Louise watched her mother's face. Her mother's eyes were very big as she read one of her emails.

Then Inez jumped up. 'OK,' she said. 'You can look at your email now, Louise.'

'Why was Mum different when she read that email?' thought Louise. She looked at the address of her mother's email. It was from an internet shopping company. But Louise didn't open it, because then Inez came back. She had her credit card in her hand. 'Is she going to buy more things?' thought Louise.

'I must buy that nice purple shirt for Joe,' said Inez, and she sat down in front of the computer again.

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Purple? Louise knew her Dad hated purple. This was all wrong! What was in that email?

‘Er... I think there’s something wrong with the computer,’ said Louise. ‘Let me look at it, Mum.’

‘OK,’ said Inez. ‘I can come back later.’

Louise started work.

* * *

‘Mum, Dad! There’s an email for you! It says it’s very important!’ Louise ran into the kitchen, with the computer in her hands.

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Joe and Inez opened the email and looked at it. Their eyes closed and they didn't speak or move. Then, after a few minutes, they opened their eyes and looked at Louise.

'What? Where are we? What did those emails *do* to us?' asked Joe.

'It's OK now, Dad,' said Louise. 'That internet shopping company put things in the emails. They put ideas in your head that you didn't know about. It was like a computer virus, but it worked on people. So everyone bought all those things they didn't need. Not very nice. All I did was change the message. Easy, really.'

'Did you really do it, Louise?' asked Inez.

'Of course I did. No internet company can stop me. This afternoon I changed the email program. This email's going to take the virus away when people open it. The internet company can't do anything about it,' said Louise.

Joe and Inez looked around at all the things that were still in their boxes. There were salad bowls and things for the garden, shoes and clothes, books and music – lots of things they didn't need. They laughed.

'The internet company thought it knew everything,' said Louise. 'But it didn't!'

'Louise, do you like chocolate cakes?' said Inez with a smile.

'Of course! Why, Mum?' asked Louise.

'Because I bought forty of them and they're in the kitchen!' said Inez.

And they all laughed.

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