

Tommy stirred in his sleep, rolling over and pushing his covers aside. Oh dear, I hope he won't catch cold, Rusty thought. Tommy's sister, Di-erdre, already had one, which hadn't helped her disposition today, she'd sniffled and dripped as much from that as she had from her crying jag. Then Rusty felt a twinge of guilt, for on the heels of that a Tommy with a cold might mean a Tommy forced to stay home from school. Which meant more time to play,

Likely, Tommy's Mom, who had always seemed to have some kind of psychic radar for such things, would arrive in a few minutes to check on her boy, and put the covers back on. So Tommy wouldn't catch a cold, anyway, and it wasn't very nice, wishing for someone to get sick, was it?

She was a nurse, maybe even a doctor, Rusty knew. He wondered. What would happen to her job after he sent out his message, because of course, the Answer included a very simple explanation to most of the world's diseases, though maybe not the common cold. The people who made tissues would most likely though have nothing to fear from the Answer, though likely not very many people would need them to staunch tears when they cried. Who would need to cry, anymore?

Tommy's computer stood on his little homework desk in a corner of the room opposite the bed. Rusty could just see it if he dimmed the glow in

his eyes and concentrated. He hoped Tommy would get up early and carry him over from his shelf, hook up his USB so he could access Rusty World. That is when Rusty would begin broadcasting the Answer. Wouldn't that be something.

He stared out at the snow once more.

"Crazy weather! Global warming! Flood and famine!" he thought. "I can fix that! Stock market crash! Job loss! Fix it! Oil wars! Energy crunch! The Answer's so simple, so easy to see, it must be they're all blind! All of them asleep, except me! But I can help, I can tell them, I can- "

Just then. A wash of dim light, the pale glow of the hallway night light spilled in, as the door to Tommy's bedroom opened. Footsteps shuffled on the carpet. Good, Mom was here just like he'd predicted, to cover Tommy up and protect him from the cold. Of course, that meant he'd be able to go to school.

But once I'm done, no-one will need school! Rusty reminded himself. World peace! The Answer! The Answer!

Which was when a little damp hand snatched him from the shelf and little fingers pried open the hatch in his back and plucked out his power pack.

Rusty fell instantly asleep. Just hearing her snuffly, little voice as it went away forever.

"Need'm for Dolly" she whispered.

(end)

Overnight on October 25 and 26, Words Alive held a fiction-writing contest. In a mere 24 hours, entrants had to complete a work of fiction – with a twist.

Until the start of the contest, at 5 p.m., they had no idea what that twist might be, but their writing had to incorporate a character who did not sleep.

We received dozens of entries, and we spent a lot of spirited time reading them, discussing them, and debating their various merits.

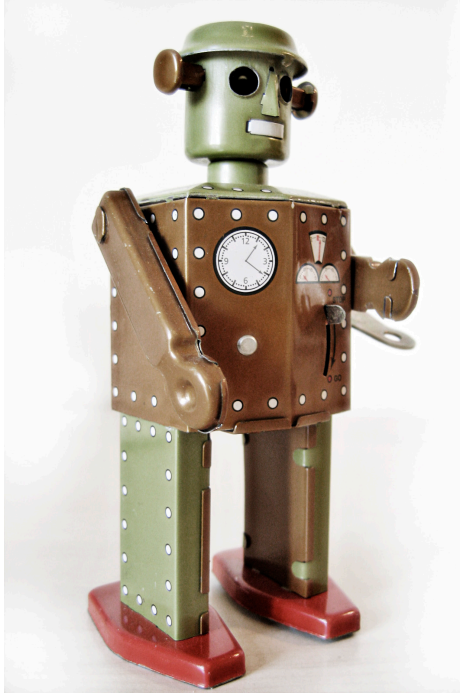
We're pleased to say that we enjoyed reading each and every one of them. But judging wasn't just based on the quality of the writing, it was also based on how skilfully the author managed to incorporate a character who did not sleep.

With that in mind, we're pleased to present here our winner, who will also be published in the pages of our contest co-sponsor, the Brandon Sun, on Saturday, Nov. 8, 2008.



RUSTY NEVER SLEEPS

A story by Andy Schroeder



“The tragedy of life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfilled. It is a calamity to die with no dreams.”

– Benjamin E. Mays
Clergyman, 1894-1985

Rusty the robot discovered the Answer to Everything at 3:12 in the morning, at the height of the first big snowstorm of the season. It was very exciting. He stood there on the shelf gleefully, warmly full of the Answer, while wind whooped around the house and snow pummeled at the window panes with soft, rapid fists. Fitful stutters of bluish light washed through the room from the television Tommy had been watching before he’d fallen asleep.

Rusty had been one of Tommy’s first real toys, aside from the soft, plushy, furry creatures and all the rest of that baby stuff. They both agreed on that. “You’re my firstest, bestest toy,” Tommy had lisped, once when they were put in the grass in the backyard in warmer days, and this memory held its own place in Rusty’s innards, joined now by the unexpected, wonderful Answer to everything.

Rusty’s head was a gray tin box, painted with a typical robot’s hair and a slit for a mouth, and with big blue lenses for eyes. The lenses concealed light bulbs that glowed when Rusty moved.

His chest was a longer tin rectangle, with buttons painted down the front and something like the ice maker panel in the kitchen fridge door offset towards the torso’s bottom, where Rusty could holster his blaster. His legs and arms were longer blocks, they were ending

boxing glove hands, the legs with Frankenstein shoes. The USB socket Tommy used to connect Rusty to his computer was on his back. Just above the hatch covering the recess for his power pack.

Tommy invariably hooked up Rusty after breakfast, so he could access the Rusty World website and play some of the latest games or just chat with some of the latest games or just have a chat with his toy or some of his other Rusty World friends. It was while Tommy was playing games that Rusty had the best chances at real communication with the outside world.

The Internet linked him to pretty much everything, everywhere. It was thanks to the Internet that Rusty knew about most of the troubles people struggled with everyday. Big things like wars and horrible floods. Smaller things like getting lost in the woods for three days or going bankrupt or forgetting how to spell “ipeccac” at the National Spelling Bee.

I can fix all that, Rusty said to himself. This morning Tommy’s little sister Dierdre had thrown one of her famous tantrums, unwilling to wait until her mother went shopping on the weekend for a replacement after her best dolly’s power pack had failed. I can fix that, Rusty grinned to himself. The secret to endless renewable energy was right there in the Answer. It was astonishing no-one had thought of it before.

Tommy’s daddy, Rusty knew, was a banker. The last few weeks Daddy seemed a sad, grim man, whenever he passed through Tommy’s playroom. Thanks to the Internet, Rusty thought he knew why.

I can fix that!, he chortled to himself, and he hugged the Answer tightly inside his chest with rising glee.

Outside Tommy’s bedroom window, snow whirled in tattered streamers, piling up in the trees lining the street, driving sideways before the wind to plaster against parked cars and the sides of houses. Loose strings of coloured Christmas lights swayed above the street. Below the window, in his bed shaped like a Formula 1 racer. Tommy lay scrunched in a ball beneath his duvet, sweating as usual in his sleep despite the chill in the room.

Everyone in the house would be sleeping, too. Rusty wondered what it would be like, to sleep, maybe dreaming, maybe just forgetting everything, cleaning out all the day’s information. The thought of sleep bothered Rusty somewhat. To just black out the way Dolly did when her power pack died seemed not at all desirable. Rusty was perfectly happy just staying awake, standing on his shelf, waiting for Tommy to wake up and play with him once more.

It was just a little lonely, this time of night.

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