

CHRISTMAS AT

The Village

by Mark Andrew Busby



SPECIAL EDITION!

CHRISTMAS AT THE VILLAGE

In The Village, ordinary things appear ordinary only so far as they are not noticed.

During the night before the night before Christmas people are tossed from their beds as Air Force One plows into the John Tripper Memorial Airstrip during a crash landing. With the President and three Heads of State on board Chief Constable Flint must have his wits about him if he's to keep the unwanted visitors out of sight until help arrives. But he's not the only one interested in the mysterious occupants. With its powers fully consolidated, the shady 'New Paradigm' government have their people out looking too. Where could they be? Who will get there first? How will it all end?

In this riotous bonus chapter written for 2018 Mark Busby turns the clock forward fifteen years returning to The Village with his trademark humor and popular characters like Farquhar, Bishop Middlefinger, and Officer Fly, who must lend Flint a hand if he's to outfox the 'Watchers' and get everyone home in time for Christmas.

Dedicated to the memory of my friend Denise and all like her who've
audaciously stood up to cancer with a resounding 'yes to life.'

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'Twas the night before Christmas, when all thro' the house
Floorboards a creakin' from guests unannounced;
The Villagers boozing o'er the Victorian Fair,
Flint on a mission with no time to spare;
While most folks were sozzled and wetted their beds,
A bunch of old fogeys began turning up dead.



Despite the hour Chief Constable Flint, a man usually very particular about his apparel, was still in his shorts, a rare but forgivable oversight under the circumstances. Drawing closer by the half jog I sensed by his perspiration the matter for which I'd been summoned must be grave, to say the least. It was unseasonably warm, a balmy twenty-one-degree Celsius on Christmas Eve, in fact, uncommon for northern England certainly, but something people had been getting used to now that the coal mines were open again. SMART Weather, the surreptitious, no, wretched entity set up by 'The Powers That Be' for complete thermostatic regulation of micro-climates, had made a killing, literally, off the back of the global fossil fuel insurgency, now in its umpteenth year.

I moved out of the shadows under a street light so that Flint might recognize me immediately.

"Farquhar is that you!" Flint gasped, out of near breathlessness. "You crafty old fox, you made it!"

I noticed Flint give off an involuntary shiver, the temperature unquestionably dropping several degrees all of a sudden, catching him underdressed. Being Christmas Eve the hole in the ozone was due to close earlier than usual, I recalled, facilitating the half-inch festive snowfall SMART Weather promised by midnight. Flint had not received the tweet!

"I do apologize, Farquhar, for wreaking havoc upon you, today of all days." He said, his lungs becoming more stable now. "But when I say things out of the ordinary are happening in the Village, please understand there are but few trusty souls to call upon at such crucial times."

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I was flattered, naturally.

“Well Flint, I’m certainly glad to have your confidence, perhaps tell me what’s so serious it warrants a mysterious meeting under a street light on Christmas Eve?” Flint took a good look around satisfying himself that there were no unwanted eavesdroppers before filling me in with the details.

“Farquhar, yesterday being the night before the night before Christmas, Air Force One crash-landed on the John Tripper Memorial Airstrip making a hell of a mess. You heard the racket, yes? Anyway, after I got there, I learned the President had been using it as his own, vacuum packed Mile High Club to party around in with his buddies. Well, it happens that aboard last night’s ‘Christmas Special’ three other Heads of State were with him, all of whom I’ve now stashed in a safe house not far from here.

My instinct was to call out ‘April Fool’ before I got tagged, but it wasn’t April and Flint’s no fool, so I kept quiet and let him continue.

“Farquhar, a rescue team is on its way from America to extract the four Heads of State as we speak but ‘The Powers That Be’ have gotten wind of them being here and are out looking too - I can only imagine why! Are you with me so far? Good! Now listen, I know how sneaky those weasels can be monitoring communications in and out of the Village and so forth, so I’ve given the President and his three chums secret codenames: Don, Kim, Bin-Bin, and lastly, Vlad. That way we’ll be able to talk freely with no one being any the wiser about their true identities.”

The way Flint was carrying on made me think he was orchestrating a good-humored ruse to jolly up the season a bit, and I was about to pitch in with my secret agent impressions when his jingle bell ring tone pinged out a message. After a few seconds, he hung up, looking pale. It took him a couple more seconds to speak, “We’ve lost codename Kim, but if we can regain control of the Rectory, we can stop the other three from misbehaving ‘til the Americans get here.” He said.

I felt a shiver run up and down my spine, and it had nothing to do with SMART Weather closing up the ozone earlier than usual, either. I’d seen that precise look upon Flint’s face before, the night I found him wandering away from Delphinium Cottage after his

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showdown with the Right Honourable Captain John Theobald Tripper, MP. *What on earth's going on?* I wondered to myself.

“Sorry Flint,” I said bullishly. “But what the Charles Dickens do you mean ‘we’ve lost codename Kim’? Who is he anyway? Has he wandered off somewhere? And what’s the Rectory got to do with anything?”

As soon as I spoke it hit me, “Ah, Flint, you rascal, you’re using the Rectory as a safe house, aren’t you.”

“Shushhh.” He replied, raising an index finger to his lips.

“Why, what is it?”

“Spies.”

“Spies? Where?”

“Look.”

Flint pointed with his nose toward a twitching curtain halfway down the street.

“They’ll alert the Watchers; we should go, quickly.”

“To the Rectory?”

“Yes. I’ll fill you in with the rest of the story as we go.”

I was glad to quicken up the pace a bit, slipping back into the shadows as we went. ‘The Watchers’, being that notorious branch of law enforcement set up under the New Paradigm to impose its will, were technically Chief Constable Flint’s responsibility. In reality, however, his title was little more than ceremonial as the Watchers were nothing else but a shady organ belonging to ‘The Powers That Be.’ Moreover, things had gotten much worse since the zealots started running the New Paradigm movement, automatically converting everyone to Christianity subjecting people to whatever religious jurisprudence happened to be fashionable that day. Policing religious mores fell to the Watchers holy counterparts, the ‘Sons’ of Brain’ who, being directly under the Bishop’s jurisdiction, were generally used around the diocese as gardeners and tree pruners.

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“Farquhar, you’re spot on! I’m using the Rectory as a safe house. Bishop Middlefinger’s already in there keeping an eye on things; it was him who messaged me just now to say that big idiot Officer Fly has lit up codename Kim with his Taser, killing him, apparently.”

Interesting. Despite Flint’s long-time hatred of the Watchers he’d managed to piece together exactly what transpired during their disastrous raid on the Shepherd residence several years before when Officer Fly was a Rookie, threatening to expose him to his real superiors unless he agreed to act as his mole inside the organization.

“The dirt’s hitting the fan, we have to get over there before anything else happens to the Package.” Said Flint. “Package? Now, who’s watching too many crime shows, Flint, eh?” I replied.

It made me feel good to share a laugh with my old friend. Ever since the New Paradigm took control humor had sunk to the incredulous type, mostly. The warmth of having laughed out loud accompanied me the rest of the way to the Rectory, where Flint began tapping out the secret knock he and Bishop Middlefinger must have agreed in advance.

‘Tap, tappity, tap, tap....tap, tap.’ Very original, I thought.

“Look, Farquhar, it’s starting to snow!” Remarked Flint, catching a flake in his eye as he looked up. “We made it just in time - these shorts won’t hold up for long in this kind of weather, you know.”

“Neither will the flip-flops.” I quipped.

“Now remember, Farquhar, once we’re inside, we’ll be using only the codenames given to our guests. ‘The Powers That Be’ mustn’t find out what’s going on in here, understand?”

“What is going on exactly, Flint?” I asked. “Mightn’t ‘The Powers That Be’ repatriate them quicker and with less fuss if they only knew?”

“Farquhar, really, where have you been? The plane crashed, so technically they’re all illegals, and by that, I mean infidels because none of them have had their passport stamped granting temporary Christianity. Our ‘guests’ are exceptionally valuable in the wrong hands, open to all manner of corruption and exploitation!”

“Oh. Silly me.” I answered, blushing.

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A shard of light poked through the letterbox as Bishop Middlefinger opened it a crack making sure it was 'friendlies,' not Watchers standing outside.

"Come in, dear friends! He said, licking his lips as if he'd just eaten one of his guests. "They're together in the study playing Mahjong, except for codename Kim, of course, he's face down in the Kitchen."

"Excellent!" Said Flint, throwing in a hint of sarcasm. "Are they still sober?"

"Vlad's not; he's gotten into the communion wine early busting into my drinks cabinet as well. The other two are teetotalers, so I've set them up with a glass of milk each."

"Milk? You mean the real stuff? Pure, with no nano flavoring? How the heck did you get your hands on a full churn of that?" Flint asked, surprised.

"Abdul's son Mo, of course! He's the only one smart enough to turn a profit from all those feral dairy beasts roaming about, the ones left over after Brexit, or whatever they were calling it."

"Mo's been peddling milk on the black market? I thought he was still in exile with his dad!"

Middlefinger and I exchanged looks. "We ought to tell him," I said awkwardly.

"Tell me what!" Flint barked.

I chose my words cautiously.

"Flint, Abdul passed away in the refugee camp about a year ago when the island succumbed to rising sea levels, but before he died, he gave Mo the deeds to his old shop hoping one day he might come back to claim what's his. Mo escaped what was left of the camp not long after the funeral slipping back onto the mainland under cover of darkness.

"You mean he's here? In the Village? Where?"

"Staying up at the old windmill 'til we can figure something out – my son Salvador's with him as we speak, the two have remained friends all the while."

The main reason Flint looked as wounded as he did was that, as Chief Constable, he thought he knew everything happening on his turf. And to be honest, I'd carried the burden of

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silence heavily long enough, chiefly because if the Watchers were to catch wind of Mo's reappearance, he'd soon disappear again, without question.

"Well, we can talk about these new revelations later," said Flint, looking slightly forgiving at least, the prospect of a fresh glass of milk having something to do with it. I followed behind Flint and Middlefinger as they headed toward the study. Middlefinger went in first, then Flint, then I, finding much baboonery inside, complete mayhem. Codename Vlad had snatched away codename Don's milk and was using it to mix himself a White Russian adding other booze he'd pilfered out of Bishop Middlefinger's mini-bar. Codename Bin-Bin was doing his level best at consoling codename Don, who'd taken to wailing mournfully on the couch, tugging at his shirt buttons until the top three popped off landing between some cushions. I knew it wasn't going to end well the moment Middlefinger removed his episcopal sash and began flaying Vlad into a state of repentance.

With divine justice delivered codenames Don and Bin-Bin returned to their game of Mahjong, teasing Vlad now he was the one in tears. Flint was crying too, though his tears were from getting a good laugh at seeing a more familiar Middlefinger rouse himself like in old times.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be saving your energy for Midnight Mass?" Flint teased. Middlefinger smiled across at him. "Nope, I'll be using a recording just like last year and the year before that. Hardly anyone turns up these days, and those that do are so drunken they usually don't notice what's going on. Besides, I'm disposed to letting homeless people sleep in the church during SMART Winter anyway, annoying mostly local Christians, especially the sober ones."

Flint sighed. "I suppose we ought to check on Officer Fly and decide what to do about codename Kim's unfortunate situation."

I followed Flint and Middlefinger out of the study into the kitchen where Officer Fly was sitting with his back turned on the tubbier-than-expected Head of State he'd just zapped in error. "Yup," said Flint, satisfied no Christmas miracle had seen fit to visit itself upon

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codename Kim's corpse, "deader than a brass doorknocker." Poor Officer Fly didn't much want to explain himself.

"I...I'm very sorry Mr. Flint, but he left me no choice, you see..."

Flint was having none of it. "Fly! What in heaven's name happened here? Explain yourself - truthfully!"

Fly tried harder, "I heard this racket going on in the kitchen so came in to explore, it was quite dark, and all I could hear was these animal type noises as if a giant rodent had gotten in and upturned the fridge. I pulled out my Taser just in case of trouble then flicked on the light. Honest to God, Mr. Flint, I just panicked when I saw what I thought was Jabba the Hutt filling its face on dried pasta! It triggered such a rush I let rip without control over my actions..."

As Fly was rounding off his explanation, I finally realized what the offensive smell was making me gag. Under Fly's misfire codename Kim had involuntarily pooped himself good and hard by the bucket load, forcing all manner of gastral nasties out into the open. This terrible experience brought me to appreciate why it is that coroners push cotton wool up their noses. Remarkably, Flint and Middlefinger seemed unfazed by it all.

"Well, we can't just tell the Americans we zapped him," Flint said. "We're going to have to think up a good story to go along with the body."

Bishop Middlefinger had just such a story at hand. "We'll tell them codename Kim felt quite peckish, so he snuck into the kitchen wedging an English muffin into the toaster. It became jammed when popping up, so he took a butter knife from the draw and tried forcing it out, only electrocuting himself in the process."

"That's a credible story," Flint said, looking thankful. "Fly, open up the chest freezer quickly. Farquhar, Bishop, move around and grab a leg each - we'll put him in there for the time being.

"Not on your life." Said Bishop Middlefinger. "He's got poo all over himself."

"Well, OK, let's throw something over him and be done with it. I'm worried the others will start misbehaving again if we don't get to them soon."

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Pinching my nose, I mustered enough courage to cover poor Kim's corpse with an old dog blanket I'd found by the back door. It struck me how bizarre things can turn out in just a few, short hours. Earlier Salvador and I had been placing flowers at our dearest Madeleine's resting place when Flint's call came out of the blue saying he needed my help. The next thing I'm tossing a flea-riddled rag over a dead Head of State while waiting for America to claim a President caught misappropriating its national chattels. But my ruminations were very short lived. There was another knock on the door only this time no secret code.

"Are you expecting anyone, Bishop?" Flint asked, jerking to attention. "My dear Flint, what do you suppose anyone would want with a Bishop on Christmas Eve?" Replied Middlefinger, being the full sarcastic moo he could be. "Yes, very funny." Said Flint. "Quickly, up to the front bedchamber for a better look."

The four of us tiptoed softly up the creaky stairs and made our way to a large sash window overlooking the street. I pried open the curtain slightly to take a look outside.

"Rats, its Beauchamp, the health minister, what's he doing here?"

Flint's outrage said it all. "Beauchamp! That champaign charlatan! He'll be up to no good for sure, wait, Farquhar, do you remember earlier, behind those curtains, I think someone saw us, and I'll bet 'The Powers That Be' sent in their worst fifth columnist to investigate us."

"I could zap him through the letterbox with my Taser; it's rechargeable." Said Officer Fly, keenly.

For a split second, I thought Flint might agree.

"No, let me deal with him." Said the Bishop. "Things need to appear as normal as possible."

Before I or anyone else could say anything, Bishop Middlefinger was at the door.

"Mr. Beauchamp, what a very pleasant surprise, a Merry Christmas to you, Sir!"

"And a very Merry Christmas to you too, Bishop. May I come in?"

"No."

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“Excuse me?”

“No, you can’t come in.”

“But why not? It’s freezing out here.”

“We have a bad case of influenza inside; I wouldn’t want you to catch anything.”

“We? Who’s *We*? You look fine to me, Bishop.”

“When I say *We* I mean my pet animals, its swine flu, they’re all sick.”

“Swine flu? You mean to say you keep swine inside the Rectory?”

“Guinea Pigs actually, and they’re all very poorly.”

Poor old Beauchamp. Whereas I disliked the fellow, and Flint positively loathed him, Middlefinger enjoyed patting him about like a cat toy. He really couldn’t get enough of it, either.

“Did you happen to see the Chief Constable about this evening by chance, Bishop? I’m looking to hand him a message, a Christmas card.”

“Well, let me think, hum, yes, I did see him walking around in his shorts earlier chatting to Farquhar. Wait a minute, yes, that’s it! I remember now; they were off to make themselves popular by distributing Christmas hampers to all of the old and poor people in the Village.”

“But that’s my job!” Hollered a hurt looking Beauchamp. “Well, actually it’s mine.” Replied the Bishop. “But they headed out that way if you want to catch up with them.”

Bishop Middlefinger used a candle snuffer he kept by the door to point Beauchamp on his way. It was hard not to laugh, especially as Beauchamp slid hither and tither trying to pick up the Bishop’s false trail. If there was one thing Middlefinger had mastered throughout his life, it was knowing exactly where to twist a knife. However, our little sojourn was short-lived. A loud crash downstairs seemed to suggest something more had happened in the study. Chief Constable Flint, Officer Fly and I shot down as quickly as we could, Middlefinger was already in close quarters.

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“What in the world is going on?” Yelled Flint, opening the door to find Vlad had choked to death on his vomit. “We tried to stop him,” pleaded codename Don and Bin-Bin in unison, “But he drank all the floor polish.”

I could tell Flint had doubts about whether they were telling him the truth. A red mark across Vlad’s wrists told a different story as did the discarded funnel - the type normally used for topping up engine oil – rolling around next to his body. It just didn’t add up.

“I think somebody's not honest around here.” Said Flint, accusingly.

“We are too!” Replied codenames Don and Bin-Bin, again with uncanny harmony.

With the banter going back and forth, I could hear Bishop Middlefinger running a bath in the next room. To my surprise, codenames Don and Bin-Bin changed tactics and tried to wrestle the advantage from Flint.

“Well you’re just a silly old policeman, Cheese Constable Flint, and we own lots of oil and gas, so we’re billionaires, so there.” Then they gave Flint a totally, uncalled-for raspberry. Without delay and again in the most irritatingly contrived display of synchronized twaddle the two looked at me and said: “So, what about you Mr. Fartypants?”

As is my nature I tried hard not to make it sound like a boast when I told them I was a trillionaire, making my fortune through generating wind power all over the world - except for where dirty old men lived, of course. Flint seemed to enjoy the moment, and I was happy enough to have given him that much.

“Bah! We hate you! We hate you!” Snapped codename Don and Bin-Bin in their synchronized pedolalia.

The sound of a nearby bath running had stopped, which logically I took to mean Bishop Middlefinger had gotten in for a soak. But no. He burst back into the study sleeves up and grabbed codename Don by the hair, which came off in his hand forcing him to take hold of an arm instead removing him from the room. Unsurprisingly codename Bin-Bin took on a very different character once the two of them had separated. Flint was just about to start

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cross-examining him about Vlad's suspicious demise when the phone rang immediately going to voicemail. It was the synthesized voice of a delivery drone saying:

“THE...ORDER...OF...TWELVE...CHEESEBURGERS...FOR...THE...PRESIDENT...OF...AMERICA...HAS...LEFT...AND...WILL...ARRIVE...IN...SIX...MINUTES...OR...LESS...THANK...YOU...FOR...CHOOSING...QUICK...BURGERS.

“Holy Mistletoe!” Yelled Flint. “That’s done it; our cover’s blown, ‘The Powers That Be’ control all of drone space; it’s just a matter of time until the Watchers get here now. We need a new plan - and quick.”

However, as is sometimes the case the old plan had a bit of fizz left in it before becoming obsolete, which was evident as Officer Fly came crashing into the study with news of his own.

“Hurry, the Bishop’s waterboarding codename Don, and things don’t look good!” He shrieked, looking all panicky.

Yes, hurry we most certainly did, but it was all over by the time we got there. Sure enough, face down in a tub of rusty colored water was codename Don, quite motionless. Bishop Middlefinger, for his part, was fiddling with an electronic kitchen timer muttering something about its precision.

“That’s gone and done it.” Said Flint, surprised. Officer Fly looked over at the Bishop, “So, are Bishops allowed to do this sort of thing nowadays?” To which the Bishop replied, “Son, religion is a common wiring problem that, from time to time, causes the odd electrical fire.” And as far as Middlefinger was concerned, there was nothing more to be said on the matter.

It was left to me to break up our momentary contemplation on morals. “Snap to it, everyone!” I said. “The Watchers are on their way over as we speak.”

We rushed back into the study where codename Bin-Bin was chowing down on one of a dozen cheeseburgers dropped off by the drone. Flint raced to the window looking outside, hoping for good news. But there was none because two truckloads of Watchers had arrived

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full of Christmas spirits, some peeing alongside their vehicles, others seeing double as they forced magazines into their carbines.

“Bad news.” Said Flint.

“Watchers?” I asked.

“Worse, it’s the Sons’ of Brian.”

There was a brief period of silence between us.

“How can you tell?” I added.

“Do you see that insignia, S.O.B stenciled onto the truck door? Well, that’s them.”

It seemed we were about to have our very own Alamo moment. I felt thankful that Salvador was not here with me. I thought of dearest Madeleine and what she might say if she saw the predicament I’d gotten myself into this time. I looked around the room; Fly was trembling, Flint stoic and Middlefinger having the time of what might be the last few minutes of his life. *Is this really how it all ends?* I wondered.

Officer Fly got very scared all of a sudden, “Wh...What’s that in the big guy’s hand? He’s holding something, what’s he holding? It’s a Ray Gun! Oh my....” Flint cut him off, “Really Fly; you stream far too much nonsense on those devices of yours, there are no such things as Ray Guns, he’s got a hold of an old fashion loudspeaker, that’s all.”

The big guy, appearing to be in charge, staggered forward a few steps raising the talking contraption to his lips hooting out, “Release Woderick!” whereupon an entire squad of drunken S.O.B’s fell about the snow in uncontrollable fits of laughter. Worse was to come, “Send out Wudolf the Wed Nose Weindeer, he hollered again, “or you’re in big twubble!” It was becoming an impossible situation.

“My god, how long’s he been waiting for the right night to say that? And where on earth do they grow these idiots!” Scoffed Bishop Middlefinger.

In an alternate universe the Bishop’s comment might have garnered a chuckle or two, but to those in the know, one need look no further than the underground labs at Beauchamp’s Centre for Excellence to find answers. Reaching his own, personal bargaining point Officer

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Fly began pleading with Bishop Middlefinger to negotiate a deal with the men outside, “You can reason with them Bishop, they’re under your command, sort of, aren’t they?”

Middlefinger paused. “Technically yes, Fly, but there’s no middle ground here, either they find me dead, or they don’t find me at all, and it’s the same for you, son.” It was cryptic, but I got the gist of his point.

Suddenly, and to everyone’s surprise codename Bin-Bin threw open the curtains and began putting on a show of his own: “All of you out there listen to me! You know who I am! I have money, lots of money, and I shall reward the man that saves me from these vile lunatics with riches beyon...” It was ironic then that the sole crew member savvy enough to stay sober that night was a woman, Boniface ‘Slingshot’ Smith, a trained sniper who, upon realizing there was nothing in it for her, let one rip the moment she lined up a shot with Bin-Bin’s pie hole. On its first pass, the bullet came so near to his head it left a crisp red furrow across his cheek. A close call? Nope. The projectile proceeded to hit the Bishop’s dinner gong behind him, varying its return trajectory by a single millimeter killing Bin-Bin out right on the ricochet. Wow, if it hadn’t seen it with my own eyes! A lot of beeping and honking followed from outside.

“Well, gentlemen,” said the Bishop, studying Bin-Bin’s final expression, “I think the game’s up! In a single night, we’ve somehow gotten through four Heads of State, and our story will never be told, or believed, outside of these walls. I have served you all without regret.”

“Hear, hear, one for all, and all for one, or something like that,” said Flint, uncertain as to what he would find in the afterlife.

I was resigned to my fate too, comforted as I held onto the photos of Madeleine and Salvador I carried with me in my wallet. Then, all of a sudden, as if things hadn’t been weird enough that evening all four of us were thrown to the floor by a god almighty crash up on the roof.

“IT’S SANTA!” Officer Fly cried out in awe, allowing himself a speedy regression into childhood. Actually, given the gravity of our situation, it was ten times better than that – it

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was the Americans. What transpired next was sketchy, because inside the Rectory we couldn't see much of what happened. Witnesses speaking up about it later reported much the same thing; once the extraction team fully rappelled from their helicopter, a battle loomed between the village steampunks on the one side, and some extraterrestrial-looking cyberpunks on the other, with locals wasting no time in taking bets. However, the former being the most reviled paramilitary police force in the world, quickly realized they were no match for their counterpart's superior sobriety, and upon realizing that fact ran away.

For all the hullabaloo Flint simply opened the back door and let the squad captain and his team come in. "Who's Flint?" The leader growled in an unpolished southern drawl. "I am," Flint replied. After wolfing down the remaining eleven cheeseburgers, his men set to work wrapping up the bodies in carpets pulled from the Rectory floor, loading them onto the waiting helicopter. "So Flint ya wanna tell me what the President of America and these other boneheads are doing dead inside a village rectory, eh?" Said the Captain. "No, not really," Flint replied. To my surprise, the American then handed Flint what looked to be a black briefcase stuffed full of money. "The deal was dead or alive Miss'r Flint, so I'm supposin' this rightfully belongs to y'all now." And if my ears didn't deceive me his last words before leaving us were, "Gen'lemen, the People of our proud nation salute y'all, have a good night now y'all hear." It wasn't long before we heard the helicopter flying away leaving a feeling of great relief as it faded into the distance.

"Well, I suppose all's well that ends well." Said Bishop Middlefinger, securing the back door checking the same was true of the front. I rifled through the kitchen draws to find a pair of scissors so I might cut a piece of cardboard to cover up the window damaged by 'Slingshot's' bullet. Officer Fly searched around for something stiffer than milk, hoping that Vlad missed the Bishop's secret stash during his binge. He hadn't. Finally, once we'd all exhausted our tasks Flint called us back into the kitchen where he was standing over a briefcase containing ten million dollars, looking very pleased with himself. "Merry Christmas, gentlemen." He said at last.

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Epilogue (*or, the divvy up as relayed through oral tradition*).

Flint saw to it the money was divided equally between us, that is to say, three million each for the Bishop, Flint and I, and one million put aside to get back Mo's inheritance, bribing whoever needed bribing to do so. Officer Fly became the proud owner of the black briefcase, which he sold at a fair price using the proceeds to better himself by enrolling on a correspondence course in Android Literature. Bishop Middlefinger said he would use the money to support God's work, as he saw it, while Chief Constable Flint bought himself a share in the Beauchamp Centre for Excellence, wanting a greater say in the end product, I dare say. As for myself, being a trillionaire three million dollars is usually an accounting error, so I put my share toward new windmills, mostly.

THE END.

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