

OPERATION ARK ANGEL

One Afternoon in Rome

It had been a glorious autumn afternoon in the eternal city. The mellow sunshine and balmy breezes had drifted over the ancient structures and ruins like gentle graces floating from Heaven. In the spacious Piazza Navona, three contented nuns had tarried for a carefree hour or two, sipping cappuccino at an outdoor café and counting their blessings, while they watched the aimless pigeons flocking from one fountain to another. But now, back at the abbey, as the pale November sun sank slowly over the Tiber, the three holy sisters, their faces ashen and aghast, clustered around the radio they shared in their Spartan cell. None of them could believe the horrors they were hearing.

The Pope announced today that the Roman Catholic Church is about to undertake a major down-sizing program, resulting in the closure of many cathedrals across North America and Europe, and the layoff of thousands of nuns and clergy. In his Advent message, the pontiff declared that the cost cutting measures were necessary due to falling attendance at Sunday Mass, which has resulted in drastically reduced revenues worldwide. The Heavenly Father added that if these severe actions were not taken, the only other alternative would be to sell a large number of priceless Vatican treasures, a move which the College of Cardinals had strictly advised against. His Holiness also confirmed that in the churches designated for closure, the candles would be snuffed and the ecumenical staff handed their pink slips by early January, as soon as the lucrative Christmas collections had been counted.

“Holy Mother of God!” Sister Margarita appealed to the sacred Virgin’s portrait on the wall. “Whatever will become of us?”

“Our fate is in the Lord’s hands,” murmured Sister Martina, her face illuminated by a fading ray of light from the narrow window slit.

“JUDAS CHRIST!” Sister Thea Maria shook her fist at the crucifix drooping above her bed. “I’ve been bound my whole life by an infallible vow of chastity,” she screamed. “And now they’re kicking me out of the convent!” The other two nuns clung to one another, startled by their sister-in-the-Lord’s vicious outburst. “Does His-High-and-Mighty-Holiness think he’s some kind of pontificating clown?” Sister Thea Maria railed on, her arms flailing. “Or does he think we’re all plain stupid? He can’t tell us that roistering in the cloisters is a sin one day, but it’s OK the next, just because he’s de-wimped us!”

Her cowering companions began to catch her point of view. “Yeah... And what about poverty?” chimed in Sister Margarita. “Our pension plan was supposed to be a ticket to Heaven when we died. I’m not leaving here alive with nothing to show for it.”

“Hell’s bells! All those years of obedience!” chirped Sister Martina, assuming a new-found bravado. “No one’s going to tell me what to do any more.”

“I guess the Pope assumes that all of his habit-less nuns will marry defrocked priests and slip quietly away to live happily ever after,” glowered Sister Thea Maria.

“Well, if that’s his solution for a severance package, we’d also have to become Mormons so we could be polygamous,” replied Sister Margarita. “There must be ten Brides of Christ like us for every man of the cloth.”

“More like forty to one if you take away the priests who would go off with each other,” simpered Sister Martina.

“Whatever happens, the three of us are going to stand united.” Sister Margarita put her arms around her two black-robed confederates. “If the blessed Church lifts a finger to harm any one of us, we’ll all fight back together.”

“Damned right!” pledged Sister Martina.

“And remember sisters,” said Sister Thea Maria. “The Pope may be against us, but we’ll always have God on our side.” At these words the three women clasped their palms tightly and looked Heavenward, desperately seeking inspiration. But instead of their usual pleas for world peace, each was secretly beseeching the Virgin with a personal prayer of impious supplication. Margarita sought to get filthy rich. Martina prayed for the courage to get wicked. And Thea Maria petitioned to get laid. After a few minutes, Sister Thea Maria opened her eyes and warily looked around. “Let’s keep all this between us girls until we have a plan” she urged.

“Good idea,” Sister Margarita whispered back. “For the time being, we’ll stick to Vespers as usual.”

God’s Chambers in Heaven

God finished watching the news and switched off the television. Of course, being divinely omniscient, he was aware of every rendition of the truth as it applied to all events on Earth. But he was still fascinated and amused to hear the stories of mankind as told by humans themselves. However, he wasn’t pleased by any aspect of the Pope’s decreed cut-backs, because the announcement clearly broadcast the message that he had lost the respect of the human race. And the longer he considered the fact that he was being ignored by his own creations, the angrier he became. To deliberate over this problem, God scrunched down into his pondering position, his elbow on his knee and his hand on his chin. God never wore clothes, on the certainty that no feature of his immortal physique needed covering for any reason. So this cogitating pose gave him a striking resemblance to Rodin’s statue ‘The Thinker’. It was during similarly hunched occasions in the past that he had sorted out the intricacies of time, space, light, gravity, quantum theory, relativity, genetics – even the extermination of those ugly dinosaurs – all in the blink of an eye.

But now, although he was convinced that once again he needed to display his dominance and teach the world a lesson, he wasn’t exactly sure what to do. As the millennia rolled by, it was getting harder and harder to terrify earthlings into submission. They had become more or less clever enough to cope with the basics - war, famine, plague, and even pestilence. And their capacity to absorb abominable violence seemed almost unfathomable. Sometimes the havoc they wreaked upon themselves impressed even God’s eye-for-an-eye bloodthirsty streak. So to zero in precisely on the form of vengeance best suited for this latest of man’s transgressions, God made up his mind to seek expert advice. But determining whom in Heaven to consult about the issue was no simple matter. He needed someone who had held supreme power over church and state, but was a scoundrel to the core. Most of those types had been popes and were in Hell. Thus God sat for many long hours, leaning forward and frowning while he reviewed his mental inventory of souls. Then suddenly he sat up straight and cried “Holy Me!” For he’d hit upon the ideal man for the job.

“Send in Henry the Eighth,” he barked at Gabriel, his messenger angel. In a flash, with a fanfare from Gabriel’s trumpet, the apparition of a stout grizzled man was standing before him, accompanied by a bevy of queens. Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Parr and Anne of Cleves hovered around their

former husband, continually jostling and poking him. Perched on his right shoulder was the head of Anne Boleyn, and on his left was the head of Catherine Howard. Blood seeped from both their necks while they nattered non-stop into each of his ears.

“You may go, ladies,” God instructed. “I need to speak to Henry in private.”

Catherine of Aragon gave God a dirty look. “As you wish, my Lord,” she declared. Then she plucked the jabbering, drippy heads from Henry’s shoulders and tucked them away, one under each arm. Turning with a dismissive curtsy she made her exit as the other two royal ladies flounced off behind.

“What a relief.” Henry mopped his brow as he watched the women leave. “You know, Guv’ner, I ‘aven’t ‘ad a moment’s peace in five ‘undred years. ‘Ow can I ever thank you?”

“Shut up, Henry,” God replied. “The only reason I keep you in Heaven is so your ex-wives can torment you. And as far as thanking me goes, I’ve brought you here to give me some advice.”

“Lady Jane Seymour’s the one I truly miss,” continued Henry wistfully. “We’re buried side by side at Windsor Castle. But I can never seem to find ‘er.”

“Henry, have you heard about what’s happening on Earth?” God asked.

“Can’t say I ‘ave, Guv,” said Henry with a yawn.

“So you’re not aware of the Pope’s campaign to close down churches and give priests and nuns their walking papers?”

Henry emitted a series of gleeful guffaws which eventually wound down to a choking wheeze. “Good on the crazy blighter, ‘ooever ‘e is these days,” the king chortled. “I did exactly the same thing meself and made cranky Pope What’s-‘Is-Name as mad as a loon. ‘Ope the new old boy ‘as the decency to give me credit for the idea, at least.”

“Listen,” said God. “I didn’t call you here to feed your ego. I’m concerned about the fact that poor attendance and lack of funds is bringing about the darkening of so many churches, because it implies that the majority of people no longer take me seriously. And by my reckoning, that means every sinner on the planet deserves to bear the full consequences for his lack of faith.”

“If it’s any consolation, Guv,” winked Henry, “I never actually believed in you meself. It came as quite a shock when I got to ‘Eaven and ‘ad to face all me wives again.”

“Hmmm,” said God.

“But I’ve never ‘eld anything against you, Guv,” the monarch quickly added.

“Henry.” God looked the king directly in the eye. “I’m seeking your counsel on this problem, because you and I share some important things in common.”

“You mean we’ve both killed people including family members and gotten away wiv it?” Henry gave a sly sideways glance.

“No,” said God tersely. “It’s because you and I both know the responsibility of being in charge of a kingdom. And you were also once Defender of the Faith, whether you believed in me or not.”

“So what is it you want to know, Guv’ner?” Henry wrinkled his forehead, his expression becoming earnest.

“How should I punish the people of Earth for turning their backs on me?” asked the frustrated deity, “So they’ll know without a doubt they’re experiencing the wrath of God.”

“And if you like what I ‘ave to say, will you send me to ‘Ell?” asked Henry.

“Why do you want to go to Hell?” inquired God.

“Because I suspect the Devil runs ‘is empire by ‘is own rules, not yours, Guv,” replied the sovereign. “So a rascal like me would be quite a celebrity in the Underworld. I think I’d receive a ‘ero’s welcome and ‘ave a merry old time there.”

“All right, all right.” God gave an exasperated wave of his hand. “If I take your advice I’ll send you down to Hell.”

“Thanks Guv,” said Henry. “Now it seems you want people to worship you again. I can understand that. But if they started going to church once more, would you really need to ‘urt ‘em too?”

“Probably,” said God. “It’s the only way they learn.”

“What I’m supposing,” said Henry, “Is maybe you could try to show ‘em ‘ow great you are by being friendly for a change. Unless you think you’ve already done that wiv your Jesus escapade.”

“Between you and me,” said God with a growl. “I sent Jesus there to prove to the world that I was such a mean son-of-a-bitch that I would even kill my own son, so everyone would take notice and be afraid of me. But never send a boy to do a God’s job. Thanks to Jesus, who spilled the beans that he was only going to play dead, my message got turned into sentimental mush. Which has led directly to the problems I’m facing today.”

“I always drew the line when it came to murdering me own flesh and blood,” stated Henry. “If you don’t mind me saying so, Guv.”

“Back to the subject,” God said impatiently. “How do you suggest I win mankind over to my side by being benevolent?” he asked. “Is there a plan, Henry? Or are you just talking through your crown?”

“Christmas is coming,” replied Henry. And he began humming ‘Greensleeves’.

“So Jesus is having another birthday,” said God. “Who cares?”

“That’s me point. No one cares. It’s Santa Claus the world loves these days,” said the king. “And you could be Santa Claus, Guv.”

“You’re saying I should deliver gifts to everyone on Christmas Eve?” God sounded skeptical.

“Wouldn’t that make ‘em realize ‘oo you are and love you for it, Guv?” asked Henry. “You catch more flies wiv honey than wiv vinegar, as they say. Imagine ‘ow the churches would be full to overflowing on Christmas morning, wiv everybody singing Glory ‘Allelujah!”

“I invited you here to discuss how I could smite the human race, and your words of wisdom are to bring the people presents!” God shook his head. “I’m going to have to sleep on that one, Henry. Perhaps for a million years.”

“Me Santa scheme’s no more farfetched than your conspiracy to ‘ave your little nipper assassinated on Earth,” protested Henry.

God addressed Gabriel. “Take him, Gabby.”

“Don’t forget about ‘EII! You promised, Guv!” Henry called over his shoulder, as he was whisked from the room. When the king was gone, God slumped again into his “Thinker” pose. But somehow he couldn’t dispel the Christmas choruses of “Hallelujah!” which were crescendoing through his head.

God’s Chambers – The Next Morning

The holy family was gathered around an ancient bearded Italian bearing an artist’s palette, who had been ushered in with Gabriel’s bugle call. “For your Christmas portrait this year,” Titian was saying, “I propose a variation of my rendering of Adam and Eve under the apple tree. Except it would portray God bestowing an apple on the blessed Virgin... Mama Mia!” he exclaimed, bursting with enthusiasm. “Never before has such a masterpiece been created!” In his passion, Titian flourished his paint brush at Mary. “You, reverend Lady would be standing under the apple boughs like Eve.” He made an upward swoop in God’s direction. “And you my Lord, would be lurking in the branches above, passing down a shiny apple into sweet Mary’s outstretched hand.” Next Titian pointed to Jesus, tears filling his eyes. “Reflected on the fruit’s surface would be a miniature portrait of you, dear Saviour, hanging from the cross.”

“Must I be included in this scene of my wife’s seduction?” asked Joseph. “Or can I leave?”

“Indeed Signore, you would be positioned under the tree beside Mary, in the innocuous role of Adam,” answered Titian. “I envision you touching your wife’s shoulder, appealing to her with an ambiguous gesture, which could mean either ‘Don’t!!! Stop!!!’, in a cautionary sense or alternatively ‘Don’t stop!’, as a sign of encouragement.

“I find these annual pictures very disturbing,” Joseph sulked, “And I’m at a loss as to why I even appear in them. I’m not really related to any of you. Mary, we should have got an annulment when we were alive. After all, our marriage was never consummated.”

“Joseph, Honey, just relax,” admonished Mary. “We have to stay together for Jesus’ sake.”

“And you and Mary are a perfect couple,” assured God. “That’s why I chose your wife for my son’s mother.”

“What sort of perverted message is that for mankind?” Joseph challenged God. “You’re the spiritual persona we’re supposed to venerate as the paragon of morality, and you’re making babies with another man’s wife. Hypocrite faker!” he blustered. “You are not a home maker! You’re a home breaker!”

“Peachy preaching, Papa Joe,” admired Jesus. “With a nice tight finish. Faker, maker, breaker. Dynamite! That rhyming haiku ending was fabulous.”

“Would you like to see yourselves with fig leaves or without?” Titian broke in.

“No fig leaf for me,” God responded, leering at Mary.

“I want a bright blue dress,” said the Virgin.

“Holy Madonna! I beg you!” implored the painter. “For the benefit of art!”

“And a great big gold halo too,” Mary continued. “If you can’t draw me that way, forget it.”

God addressed the flabbergasted artist. “Lay out the background on canvas, and let me know when it’s time for us to pose for the close-ups.”

“Dad, can I go and play with John the Baptist’s head?” asked Jesus.

“No!” said God and Joseph, both at once.

“Bright blue dress... bright blue dress...” Titian muttered over and over, packing up his palette. God shot a knowing look at the painter and rolled his eyes in Mary’s direction as the old master stormed out.

“While the four of us are here,” said God after the artist had left, “Tell me what you’d like for Christmas.”

“Why do you persist in asking that question every year, Dad?” demanded Jesus. “You know our answers. We’ve told you a thousand – No, TWO thousand - times. But you’ll never give us what we truly desire.”

“I want sexual pleasure,” said Mary. “You denied it to me when I was on Earth. What are you going to do about it?”

“And I want to be a proper Dad with children of my own,” said Joseph. “Not the proxy father of your kid. How are you going to make that come to pass?”

“I just want to have a birthday that isn’t on Christmas,” stated Jesus. “It’s a real bummer. I only get half the presents that everybody else does. From the very beginning, it’s always been that way,” he grumbled. “The wise men only brought me single packages of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

“But you have privileges in Heaven that no one else has,” reminded God.

“Yeah, lucky us,” said Mary. “We get to hang out with you. Your Sacred Nakedness. Big deal.”

“Dad, you could use your powers to send us back to Earth so we could have normal human lives,” said Jesus. “But you won’t, because we’re too important as symbols here in Heaven. It’s no secret. You need to keep reputed demigods like us around for the virtues we exemplify. By showing off

super-stars such as ourselves, you boost your sanctimonious supremacy, not to mention your hallowed ego. Which is ultimately all you really care about. You self-serving jerk!”

“Silence!” God roared. “I got along happily for thousands of years before you three ingrates came along.”

“Sure,” said Jesus. “But now we’re here, you’ll never let us escape. You enjoy watching us squirm under your thumb.”

“I don’t want to complain like you,” said God, through clenched teeth. “But in two thousand years, has any of you once asked me what I would like for Christmas?”

“Why should we?” asked Jesus. “There’s no point. You’re God, the Omni-boss. Omnipresent. Omniscient. Omnipotent. You can do anything you like. And everything is essentially yours. What can we give you?”

“Well, as it happens at this moment I’d like your help for a change, instead of your usual criticism,” said God. “Times are tough on Earth. The Pope is closing churches because no one is coming to Mass, and people believe Santa Claus is more important than we are. I’m planning to win back the faith of the human race by playing Santa Claus for real, and leaving gifts for everybody on Christmas Eve. My aim is to give everyone their heart’s desire. It’s a huge undertaking and there isn’t a lot of time. So I need your support.”

Mary stood incredulous with her hands on her waist. “That’s the craziest idea I’ve ever heard.” Glaring at God, she threw up her arms in disgust. “Don’t you ever learn from the past? Every thousand years or so you get riled up at the way humans are running their lives and you decide to intervene. First you expelled Adam and Eve from Eden for tasting some fruit you arbitrarily banned. And they’re the nicest couple anyone could ever meet. Then you sent the flood to drown everyone. God knows – well YOU know – why. After that you destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because everyone there was having too much fun, and that would never do. But Sodomites are people too! Next, grumpy Moses convinced you to inflict plagues on the Egyptians and kill all their first born sons. Murdering innocent children - that’s called infanticide, as if you didn’t know! Then you had the bright idea to send Jesus – your own son – OUR son - down to get crucified for doing your dirty work - and you roped me and Joseph into that disaster. Your latest undertaking – and that’s an accurate term - was to sponsor the crusades, in the hope that all the nations would annihilate each other. And let me remind you that after a millennium those wars are still going strong. No wonder nobody wants to have anything to do with you – or us. You’ve been working against the world from the minute you created it! And now you intend to interfere with earthly affairs again by staging the second coming of Santa Claus! Well count me out! When I think of all the harm you’ve done...” Tears were rolling down Mary’s cheeks.

“But Mary, this time I’m not being nasty,” said God. “I’m being nice. I’ll concede I’ve never tried that. It’s a new approach.”

“Beware of any god bearing gifts,” warned Mary through her sobs. “That’s how I answer the requests I get from people needing help.”

“Why do folks even pray to you, Mom?” asked Jesus. “Don’t they realize how messed up your life was? They’d be nuts to expect you to save them. I never thought you’d save me.”

“That’s right, Mary,” agreed Joseph. “You’re the only mother on record with two simultaneous husbands you never slept with. Call it Immaculate Bigamy. How weird is that?”

“No more bizarre than your honorary occupation, Joe, Honey,” Mary shot back. “Consort to the Eternal Queen of Virgins. You’re the epitome of uselessness! It’s impossible to hold on to that office and your manhood too.”

“Has anyone heard the joke about the kid who had two fathers, one omnipotent, and one impotent?” quipped Jesus. “They both said he was myth-begotten.”

“Mary, we should have done it, if only once.” Joseph ignored his son’s attempt at levity. “We missed our perfect opportunity that night in Cana after the wedding, when we got plastered on Jesus’ home brew.”

“I’m afraid my one and only divine incident put me off mortal lovemaking till my dying day,” despaired Mary. “But Joseph - I wonder - have you ever wished you’d been a real eunuch instead of a castrato de facto? That would have simplified our situation significantly.”

“No, my dear,” Joseph replied. “With all the webs we weave, I don’t play mind games against myself too.”

“My God, Dad, you’ve always manipulated us – and the human race - like puppets,” said Jesus. “But I’ve got to admit, for once this Santa Claus project you’ve come up with sounds kind of nifty. Maybe it’s just because I love presents. That’s the reason I used to tell everyone it’s better to give than receive. But when the circumstances are appropriate, I actually believe give and take is best. So if we pitch in for your cause, will you let us have what we want?” he asked.

“Can Mary and I return to Earth to start new lives?” pressed Joseph.

God wished he had someone he could pray to and could spend a few minutes in his ‘Thinker’ position, engaged in sober second thought before providing his reply. But he realized the moment required godly decisiveness. “OK,” he shrugged. “I’ll give you all another chance on Earth.”

“Only this time around make me a queen,” interjected Mary. “I’ve had enough of flea-bag hotels and sleeping with donkeys.”

“As you command, Your Majesty,” assented God.

“I’m not going back down there, shuddered Jesus. “I’m too scared of getting bumped off again. And I’ve no intention of reprising my role as the born-to-die sacrificial lamb. But Dad, what will you do about my birthday?”

“Don’t worry, Son. I can’t kill you twice,” said God. “But I also can’t rewrite history to finagle your date of birth. Only humans have memories short enough for that. However, I will double up on any gifts you receive from now on.”

“Then we have a deal,” smiled Jesus.

“Yippee!” cried Mary. “Joseph, Honey, I’m going to bake us an apple pie!”

God sighed and beckoned to Gabriel. “Find Noah and all three of the wise men. Oh yes - Michelangelo and Saint Christopher too. Jesus, Mary and Joseph will be meeting with me here at two o’clock this afternoon. Invite the others, and Gabby, come along yourself in your archangel capacity.”

The Convent in Rome – Christmas Eve

Sisters Margarita and Thea Maria sat on a stone bench in the hallway outside their Mother Superior’s chambers. Sister Martina had been the first of the three summoned for a private audience with the Reverend Mother, and now the other two were waiting their turn. For the past twenty minutes, they had listened to their partner-in-prayer’s screams of anguish coming from behind the closed door, each forlorn outcry conveying an agony greater than the one before.

“They’re either demonstrating a new model of Catherine wheel or telling poor Martina she’s toast,” remarked Sister Thea Maria.

“Perhaps both,” replied Sister Margarita. “The Catholic Church is nothing, if not thorough.”

At last the heavy door creaked halfway open, and Sister Martina, dazed and devastated, tottered out. The weeping nun, a study of sorrow and misery worthy of a tortured saint, collapsed into the bosoms of her friends. Through her incoherent, soggy babble, punctuated by squeaky whimpers and heart-rending wails, phrases emerged such as, “two weeks notice”, “no room at the convent”, and “gone by Little Christmas”.

“Sister Margarita, please come in.” The tone of the abbess, calling from her sanctum, was composed and aloof.

“Go to Hell!” Margarita yelled back. “And I mean that literally!” she added. Then she and Thea Maria assisted the wobbly Martina to her feet. Slowly they walked her through the winding dark corridors of the convent and into the sunlight beyond the forbidding gates.

“Where to now?” asked Margarita, surveying the speeding Roman traffic.

“First to the Farmacia before it closes,” answered Thea Maria. “We’ve got to pick up supplies.”

“But we have no money,” said Margarita.

“I have some.” The first two nuns were surprised to hear Martina’s sniffing voice. “I’ve been skimming off the loose cash from the collection plate every day for the last month,” she confessed, pulling a small but bulging purse from under her robes.

Thea Maria kissed her on both cheeks. “I knew we could count on you,” she beamed. “And whatever we can’t afford at the drugstore, we’ll steal.”

“What if we get caught?” gasped Margarita.

“Dressed the way we are?” Thea Maria laughed. “No one would ever suspect a nun of anything such as a crime on Christmas Eve!”

God’s Launching Pad in Heaven – Christmas Eve

God surveyed the bustling scene unfolding before him, and he saw that it was good. Situated on top of a bank of fluffy snow-white clouds that stretched as far as the eye could see, was a sleigh of monstrous proportions. Noah had reproduced his notorious ark with the help of a miracle crew of workmen conscripted by Jesus, who had mustered all of his apostles for the job. To adapt it for winter landings, Joseph had exhibited his master carpenter skills by adding wooden runners to the boat. The crowning touch had been provided by Michelangelo, who had carved a giant figurehead of the Virgin Mary to guide and protect the mission. Mounted on the front of the sleigh, the statue was adorned with a dazzling blue dress and golden halo, and was so radiantly beautiful it had satisfied Mary's craving for an iconic Christmas portrayal. Mary was so enamoured with the result, she had even granted the artist Titian's petition to paint his *au naturel* picture of the holy family as he pleased.

For the past several weeks, Mary had been listening attentively to the Yuletide prayers streaming from Earth, and discovering what everyone there longed for in their hearts. With the help of the three wise men, a comprehensive record had been prepared, checked and double-checked, to make sure no one was left out. The magi scholars had also aided God with the astronomical computations necessary to chart his route.

The one notable personage not incorporated into God's plans was Saint Nicholas, ostensibly the patron saint of the enterprise. God was more than a trifle jealous of Nicholas' universal popularity with humankind, compared to his own dwindled following. The jolly philanthropist had originally established his reputation for generosity by dropping money bags down the chimney of three destitute daughters, so they could have dowries and become honest married women. For this mercy he had earned God's favour and in due course a holy place of honour in Heaven. And curiously, Nicholas thereafter had remained a perpetual sucker for rescuing damsels in distress who came in groups of three. But as the centuries progressed, God had become ever more perturbed that the affable saint's name had been corrupted to Santa Claus, and most of his other attributes had been similarly misrepresented and over-inflated on Earth, as mankind elevated his rank from sainthood to demigod. And thus Nicholas' esteem in the eyes of God, who was infuriated by any divine competition, had diminished proportionally as his terrestrial fame increased. But despite his sidelined status, when Saint Nicholas caught wind from the Virgin Mary of the fervent pleas of a threesome of frantic nuns in Rome, he felt compelled to attempt to assist them. So he had tracked God down and requested that their appeals be conscientiously heeded. To clinch his case, Saint Nicholas had insisted that it was his own express Christmas wish that the troubled ladies' prayers be fulfilled. And being righteously bound by the magnanimous principles governing his Yuletide endeavour, God was obliged to begrudgingly grant the tainted saint's entreaty on the nuns' behalf.

Now, with all the arrangements complete, and just a few minutes to go before lift-off, God climbed proudly onto the bridge of the ark, the command post of his mighty ship. Wearing only a festive red hat with a furry white pompom – a peace offering from Saint Nicholas - he took his place beside his first mate, Noah, who stood at his right hand. On his left was Saint Christopher, who had agreed to bless the sleigh and join the expedition to ensure a safe journey. The last few items were just being brought on board. All the presents prescribed by Mary's list had been lovingly and patiently hand-crafted in a workshop supervised by God himself. His holy helpers had included the most prestigious Biblical patriarchs, prophets and saints, who had also carefully stowed their precious Christmas cargo in the ark's hold.

At the project's inception, after crouching for a spell of creativity in his 'Thinker' mode, God had titled the venture 'Operation Ark Angel'. And as he peered out in front of his sleigh, watching everything for the mission fall perfectly into place, he congratulated himself on how aptly the name applied.

Stretching for what seemed like a mile ahead of the bow of the craft was a double line of angels, harnessed and ready to spread their wings. At the front were the archangels, who had been notified by Gabriel to show up for duty if they expected to maintain their prestigious 'Arch'-angel standing. Behind them were the rank and file of the Heavenly Host, who had been promised that if they participated in this Christmas Eve extravaganza, they would henceforth be designated 'Ark'-Angels in their own right. To avoid confusion between 'Arch' and 'Ark', God had scrupulously kept all communications concerning the subject of 'Operation Ark Angel' on a strictly verbal basis.

When the last gift had been loaded, God raised his arm skyward and a mighty clap of thunder sounded, signaling the moment of take-off. In unison, the angels lifted their wings and surged forward. With a great flapping clamour and a rushing wind, the sleigh rose from its nest of clouds and ascended into the sky. As it gained altitude, it circled around Heaven, saluting the spirits below with a strident arpeggio from Gabriel's horn, and an anthem of praise celebrating 'Hosanna in the Highest' sung by the soaring angel choir. From his lofty vantage point, God waved down to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, who had stayed behind to preside over his celestial realm. And then the course of the sleigh straightened out, heading directly toward Earth, while God encouraged and spurred on his Ark Angels, calling them by name. "Now Gabriel, now Michael, now Raphael and Seraphim. On Ariel, on Uriel, on Jophiel and Cherubim!" And finally, every soul in Heaven heard God exclaim as he drove out of sight, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night!"

'Operation Ark Angel' was underway.

St. Peter's Basilica in Rome – Christmas Eve

Worshippers who had lapsed from the church for the past year were now flocking to St. Peter's Basilica for midnight Mass. These Christmas Catholics were met at the entrance by a trio of sacred sisters, doling out condoms from festive baskets, and offering benedictions and reassurances along with their latex keepsakes.

"Merry Christmas from your church," smiled Margarita.

"I sprinkled them with holy water myself," confided Martina.

"The Holy Father likes this kind best," guaranteed Thea Maria.

After the doors had closed and the service was underway, the three emancipated women sat on the steps in front of the cathedral. With the jubilant music wafting around them from inside, they bawled uncontrollably together to the tune of 'Joy to the World'.

"May we be of assistance?" The tearful ladies gazed upward through blurry eyes. Above them, as if sent from Heaven, towered the forms of three of the Vatican's Swiss guards, looking splendidly dapper in their brightly striped tunics and pantaloons.

"Sure," said Thea Maria. "Take me to your leader."

"OK," said Margarita. "Show me the money."

"Ummm," said Martina, trying to think. "Get me drunk as a monk!" Then she reached into her basket and pulled out several small square packets. Extending her hand, she stammered, "W-would you like a... condom?"

Ready and willing to obey their orders, the guards solicitously helped their liege ladies to their feet. A moment later, bound on their various quests, the women departed in separate directions, arm in arm with their handsome personal protectors. As a last-minute reminder, Thea Maria called, "Girls! See you back here at noon!"

God's Chambers – Christmas Morning

God sat on his Throne of Judgment, with Henry the Eighth at his feet.

"Look what you've done, Henry," he said, tuning his television to the twenty-four hour news channel.

A flood of shock and terror is sweeping the planet on this Christmas morning. Reports are still flowing in, but it now appears certain that every home in every country on Earth was surreptitiously entered during the night, and an unusual assortment of supplies was deposited at each location. Most households received a few popular children's toys with various other items, often including guns, jewellery, illegal drugs, pornography, beer, and the keys to sports cars and pickup trucks. All of the goods were of excellent quality, and many of the boxes were gift-wrapped. No organization has yet claimed responsibility for this infamous copy-cat Santa Claus caper, but police are cooperating globally to track down the perpetrators of these worldwide home invasions. So far there are very few clues to work with, as none of the break-ins show any sign of forced entry. This has caused panic in the streets, as citizens become ever more fearful that their houses are not safe and could be violated again.

Rioting has started in many cities, and armies have been posted on full alert. The president of the United States will broadcast an official statement tonight at eight o'clock eastern time. We will continue to follow this story as more developments occur.

"A copy-cat Santa Claus caper!" growled God. "Henry, that's what the world thinks of your dumb stroke of genius."

"Still," reasoned Henry. "I made the suggestion wiv good intentions. But the 'uman race can be finicky, Guv'ner. I always say you can lead an ass to a carrot patch, but you can't make 'im eat."

"I could become the laughing stock of Heaven because of you," God brooded.

"You didn't 'ave to take me advice, Guv," replied Henry. "But you did. And you can't blame me if no one on Earth figured you for their sugar daddy. Like I said, people are a finicky lot. So I deserve to go to 'Eil anyway, don't I then? A bargain's a bargain, ain't it?"

God stood up from his throne, and pointed his finger at Henry. "The Devil take you!" he roared, "But your whining Catherine's and Anne's are going as well!" Hapless Hal was immediately surrounded by his royal retinue of chatelaines, all of whom regarded God with dread and horror.

"Not them spiteful Kates and Annies, Guv! At least send Lady Jane too. I beg you!" Henry's final Heavenly words faded with him as he and his wives vanished from God's sight, leaving only a whiff of brimstone fumes lingering in the air.

St. Peter's Square in Rome – Christmas Afternoon

The multitude congregated in St. Peter's Square was becoming restless. Anxiously they looked up to the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, waiting for the pontiff to emerge. It was five minutes after twelve, and the Holy Father was late for his Christmas blessing, which he traditionally pronounced on the stroke of noon. At last three Swiss guards escorted three nuns, dressed in simple black habits and laughing as if to split their sides, onto the balcony. Quickly the mood of the crowd shifted from consternation to amazement, as the sisters prepared to speak.

"Merry Christmas everyone!" called the first nun, coming forward with a wave. "My name's Thea Maria, and I'm here to tell you there will be no tidings of comfort and joy from His Holiness today. He spent last night in bed with me, discovering joys and comforts he claimed he'd never known before. So this morning he's been confessing his carnal sins to the Papist Inquisition. Let's hope the bastard is fired by sundown! After all, it doesn't take all day to destroy the papal ring and seal! But don't worry folks. I made the old geyser wear a condom, which should mean we're both technically still celibate, according to Catholic sex-rules at least." Before stepping back, Thea Maria made the sign of the cross, and then jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the window of the Pope's suites. "He's outa there!" she proclaimed with boisterous relish.

The crowd stood stunned, as the next sister began. "Hi everybody. I'm Margarita," she said. "I just want you people to know that you're standing on my property. I have all the deeds with me, signed into my name." She held up a sheaf of parchment scrolls and ancient documents. "As of early this morning, everything in Vatican City belongs to me," she continued. "All the land and buildings. Even the contents. Wow! I own a whole country! St. Peter's Basilica, the Sistine Chapel, the Pope's apartments and gardens, not to mention those pretty statues by Michelangelo! I still can't believe it. I'm rich! I've told all the Catholics here to get out by tonight. But you can stay in the square if you like. And I'm going to keep these guys around – for security purposes!" She gave her Swiss bodyguard a squeeze. "And let me quote you the only verse in the Bible that I know is true. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!' It happened to me, and it can happen to you. So go for it!" she shouted. "And now I want to introduce my friend Martina," she added. "She's a little shy, but she has an important message."

Martina's tone was reserved but steady as she started off. She was still slightly tipsy from the night before, which built her confidence. The audience was totally silent, apprehensive about what blow might come next. "I'm going to begin by telling you that I'm not actually a nun any more," she said. "The Catholic Church absolved me of my vows – which means they fired me - yesterday afternoon, and my friends chose to quit with me. I suppose you'd call us renegades. And if we're lucky, I guess they'll excommunicate us after today. But while I'm here, as an ex-nun, there are a few comments I want to get off my chest. These are beliefs I've had, but was prevented from expressing up till now."

"First," said Martina, "I believe an unhappy couple may end an irreconcilable marriage." She took a nervous gulp. "But real Catholics don't get divorced." A soft murmur rippled through the crowd.

"Second, I believe nuns and priests should have the right to marry. Even the priests who want to marry each other." She tried to sound brave. "But real Catholics keep their clergy in self-denial." Martina thought she noticed some clapping from around the square.

"Third, I believe birth control simply makes sense." Martina's voice carried the passion of true conviction. "But real Catholics don't use condoms." This time there was no mistaking it. Martina heard a cheer from all sides.

“Fourth, I believe pregnancy should be every woman’s choice.” Martina was pleasantly surprised at how self-assured she was feeling. “But real Catholics don’t allow abortions.” She was astounded to find that her statement brought hearty ‘hurrahs’ and prolonged applause, as the onlookers warmed to her words.

“Fifth,” she announced, “I believe the church needs female priests, and especially a woman for Pope.” The audience was oddly hushed, holding its breath for her punch line. “But real Catholics want masses managed by men.” At this declaration the crowd exploded into an exuberant standing ovation, although in fact they were already on their feet. The sound they produced echoed and reverberated around the square for several minutes. Finally the noise calmed down enough for Martina to finish.

“Thank you so much everyone,” she said. “This means more to me than you can imagine. When I started my remarks, I thought I’d be uttering things that were evil and wicked. But maybe I’m not the wicked one after all.” Blowing kisses, she cried ‘I love you’ over and over again, as the throng in St. Peter’s Square continued to cheer and shout her name.

God’s Chambers – Christmas Night

God lay sprawled on the sofa with Jesus on the floor below. His son was wearing a ball-cap and munching popcorn while they watched the American president’s television address.

Fellow citizens! As your president, let me assure you that my administration has acted quickly and resolutely in light of the home-entry crimes committed world-wide last night. We have consulted with governments of the major powers, and in less than twenty-four hours, we have already taken the following steps.

First, we have agreed with all the nations on Earth that commencing immediately, Christmas festivities will be discontinued on December twenty-fifth. Instead, they will be held on each country’s independence day. This will eliminate the possibility of another global copy-cat Santa Claus caper and its ensuing chaos from ever happening again.

Next, our intelligence sources have determined that the only organized body capable of carrying out the attack observed last night, except for the United States of course, is the nation of China. Only the Chinese have the resources to infiltrate every community, even those in far-flung corners of the globe, and set up terrorist cells in our midst. And only the Chinese people and their politicians are devious and secretive enough to plan and pull off such a clandestine plot. This is not just a baseless charge. Your government doesn’t make unsubstantiated accusations. Since the household violations were discovered this morning, evidence has been quickly and expertly compiled which proves indisputably that the Chinese are undeniably guilty.

Finally, as your president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, I have just issued an order to launch an atomic missile attack on the nation of China. As I speak, rockets are heading toward Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. China must accept these strikes as punishment for its actions. If it does not, and it dares to retaliate, it must bear the responsibility for full-scale nuclear war.

As Americans, I know I can depend on your total support at this critical time. Rest assured that your leaders in Washington are working as hard as humanly possible to protect your best interests. Above all else, it is imperative to keep calm and maintain law and order. And let us pray together for God’s guidance through this crisis.

Good Night and until the Fourth of July, Merry Christmas.

God switched off the television.

“Hey, Dad,” said Jesus. “Did I hear right? From now on, Christmas is going to be celebrated on a different date in every country?”

“That’s correct, Son,” replied God.

“Awesome!” cried Jesus, tossing his hat in the air. “There must be hundreds of states down there. I’ll be getting presents nearly every day! Wait till I tell Mom and Papa Joe! By the way Dad, where are they?”

“I sent them back to Earth, like they asked,” God responded.

“Verily!” exclaimed Jesus. “And is Mom really a queen this time?”

“Of course,” said God. “That’s what I promised.”

“Dad,” said Jesus, “Peter, Andrew, James and Jonah are going on a fishing trip in the morning. Mind if I go with them?”

“Enjoy yourself, Son,” God answered. “Just be home in time for the Apocalypse. And don’t let the whales bite!” he warned with a chuckle.

Mary’s Royal Chambers on Earth – The Day After Christmas

Mary waggled her abdomen at her husband. “Get over here and try again, Joe, Honey,” she coaxed. “We’ll get this right yet. Oooww!!! Not with your stinger, you ninny-bee. That hurts.”

“I didn’t think sex was so much work,” panted Joseph. “When people talk about the birds and bees, it always sounds so natural and easy.”

“Stop complaining,” Mary scolded. “Having sex is the only job you have now you’re a drone. And I’m sure we’ll improve at it with practice together. We’ve both been virgins a long time, after all.”

“This wasn’t exactly what I was expecting from a return trip to Earth,” grunted Joseph.

“I should have known that God would throw a curve when he acquiesced to make me a queen without putting up a fight,” said Mary. “How long do creatures like us live, anyway?”

“I don’t think God’s in any hurry to bring us back to Heaven, judging by the way he’s treated us,” Joseph sighed. “So I suspect that before we’re through, we’ll be far and away the oldest pair of bees who ever bumbled over the face of the planet.”

“I hope you’re wrong, but I doubt it,” said Mary. “I’m sure he’ll keep me banished for eons. If only to avoid hearing my rants about setting off World War Three with his stupid Santa stunt. What a dirty double-crosser! We gave him our full cooperation with his hare-brained scheme, and in return he reincarnated us into insects! Talk about a deal with the Devil.”

“Considering how everyone fell for God’s Santa Claus fiasco, it looks like we’ve all been competing for top spot on the stupid scale,” lamented Joseph.

“He deserves to be swarmed!” condemned Mary. “Oh well, while we’re stuck in this hive, we might as well make the best of it.” She shimmied her ample queen bee hips and buzzed her wings. “Now Joseph, Honey, climb up once more, and this time hold on with all six feet and push harder. And for inspiration, think of the thousands of cute little larva-bee babies we’ll have, who’ll some day look just like us.”

“Yes, my dear,” he replied, slowly crawling onto his wife. “And thanks for the motivational words. I desperately need them. You know, I’m actually a breast man.”

God’s Chambers in Heaven – New Year’s Eve

God was again presiding in his chambers from his official Judgment Seat. On his right was the archangel Gabriel. On his left was a minor seraph named Ziggy. Between them lay Gabriel’s magnificent golden horn, mangled beyond repair. Ziggy had a black eye and a bloody welt erupting in front of his nimbus. Both angels had ruffled feathers.

“I was sitting there, minding my own business, practising scales on my bugle,” Gabriel was explaining. “Then suddenly, Ziggy came along and tried to steal the horn out of my hands. So I hit him over the head with it.”

“Why shouldn’t I be allowed to toot on the best instrument in Heaven?” asked Ziggy. “I’m an archangel now, and I’m tired of playing my crappy little harp. Louis Armstrong’s been teaching me ‘When the Saints go Marching In’ on his trumpet. We were going to work on the high notes together for the New Year’s parade tomorrow.”

“You’re not an A-R-C-H angel, Ziggy, you dummy,” taunted Gabriel. “You’re an A-R-K angel. Which spells S-O-R-R-Y! You’re not S-P-E-C-I-A-L like me at all.”

“What does that mean?” Ziggy turned to God in alarm.

“You pulled my Noah’s Ark sleigh on Christmas Eve, Ziggy,” God replied. “That makes you an Ark Angel.”

“Not an A-R-C-H angel?” confirmed the confounded seraph.

“No,” said God.

“Then none of us in the Heavenly Host Chorus are A-R-C-H angels!” Ziggy’s voice rose louder and louder. “We’ve all been duped and swindled. This is scandalous! You guys just wait till I tell the Guild of Seraphim and Cherubim. We’ll launch the biggest class action Angel Rights case ever! There’ll be Hell to pay, so to speak. And rest assured there’ll be no singing in Heaven till we receive the privileges we were promised.”

“You owe me a new horn!” Gabriel bellowed at Ziggy as the lowly Ark Angel ran off.

“I’ll be taking this case under consideration,” God told Gabriel, distraught over the likelihood of an Ark Angel revolt. “Let me get back to you,” he mumbled, tripping over the scrap-metal bugle wreckage as he hastily dismounted from his throne.

God’s Chambers – One Hour Later

God languidly stretched out of his 'Thinker' squat, from which he'd been scrutinizing Titian's finished portrait of the holy family, titled 'Virgin and Apple'. Slowly he smiled to himself, and directed Gabriel to find Lady Jane Seymour. In a moment, with a feeble round of applause and a superficial flourish from the trumpet-less herald angel, the queen was standing before him, emanating regal poise and elegance.

"Welcome, Your Highness," God nodded.

"Yes, my Lord?" Lady Jane regarded God, in his divine nude splendour, with a quizzical eyebrow.

"Your husband paid you several generous compliments before he departed our celestial ethers for warmer climes," said God.

"I hope you interpreted His Majesty's compliments as complimentary to me, my Lord," responded the monarch.

"I appreciate your concern, my Lady," laughed God. "But I assure you that in this matter, I accepted Henry's opinion at face value."

"Then I'm flattered, my Lord," said Lady Jane.

"I'm planning a vacation to the Garden of Eden," said God. "It's a wonderful paradise, Jane. You may have heard of it. Would you like to come along? Just you and me?"

"I'd be delighted, my Lord," she replied.

"Call me God," said God. "Every now and then I escape the cares of the cosmos and spend a millennium or so there, enjoying nature and taking the waters. The fruits from those parts are especially delectable. Particularly the apples."

"So I understand," said her majesty.

"I can practically taste them already," God smirked.

"My, God. Indeed!" exclaimed Lady Jane.

"Shall we then?" Reaching out, God took the queen by her hand. Before he left his mansion, God stopped for a second before Michelangelo's figurehead of the Virgin Mary, which was standing awkwardly propped in a corner. Tenderly he stroked the statue's brow and whispered in her uncomprehending ear, "You're in charge now, my darling Ark Angel." Then he and Lady Jane disappeared together into the mists of the firmament.

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