

## A Covid Christmas

We'd been given a five-day window by the Government to travel to Bethlehem. The trains were fully booked, and we lost two days getting there. So, by the time we arrived at our Premier Inn, *Booking.com* had given up our room. The receptionist, mumbling from behind a plexi-glass screen, was polite, and apologetic but, in the end, quite helpful.

"We've a garage out the back," she said. "There's an old Landrover there. You can put the seats down and kip in the back. There'll be no room-service, I'm afraid. Well, it's just the way it is. But there's a Continental Breakfast available early doors. That'll cost you, though. You'll have to come first thing, mind, 'cause it'll be chockablock from after seven. Everyone's on their way home for Christmas, see?"

I'm not sure I took it all in. We were just exhausted. Anywhere would do. Even a garage out the back ...

Christmas day was hard going, what with the baby and all. The Landrover was actually OK, but the garage was perishing. "You'll have to keep the doors open," the receptionist had said. "Air-flow, see? Better for the Covid, yon Professor Leitch says."

That's how the workmen got in, with the door wide open to the wind. It was just getting dark when they appeared. Workies. A whole bunch of them, hanging about in the yard. No trouble, like, and there was nothing to nick anyway. But crivens, did they take us by surprise!

Two of them stuck their heads through the Landrover windows. "Baby ..." one of them said, and something else too, but it was hard to make out whether it was a question, or a comment, or an accusation. That's the problem with face masks.

A dog barked. "Lie down, lie DOWN, Shep," the other one said. I heard *that* clear enough, 'cause his face mask was under his chin. Shep heard it too, it appeared, 'cause the barking stopped right away.

Soon, they were all there, the Workies that is, gawping, saying nothing. "Where's your social distancing?" I thought. But I didn't say, just did a silent

count to make sure there no more than six. It's a maximum of eight indoors, see, and with me and the missus ... The baby doesn't count, the Professor says. No, wait! It's fifteen *outdoors*, isn't it? Maybe a garage with the doors open qualifies as being outside.

One way or another we might have got away with it if the three suits hadn't turned up. The missus thought they were the Covid Police, jobsworths, come to do a count, tipped off by the receptionist. I reckoned they were just pushing their luck because all the rooms were taken. Anyway, they were a cut above the ordinary, that's for sure. *And* they knew what they were about. The Workies picked up the vibes and moved aside to let them through.

One by one they came in. Careful, they were. More than two meters apart too. The first one, a tall man, with slicked-back hair, had all his PPE sorted. A perspex shield, he had on. Like a crown, it was. And he had a briefcase, brown one, fancy, which he laid down on the garage floor.

"Something for the baby," he whispered. "Best leave it for 72 hours, though, just to be on the safe side. Or if you have some alcohol gel ..." Fat chance, I thought. But he was gone, to be replaced by another suit, horn-rimmed glasses, black face mask with a gold star embroidered on the side. Jenners bag, he had. "For the baby ..." Then a third, with a shoe-box kind of thing, silvery paper, red ribbon ... "Baby ..."

"How many people are out there?" A voice broke the tension. It was the receptionist, out at the back door for a fag. "The Covid Police are in town," she shouted. "You'd better watch out ..."

But the suits had gone, without another word. And the Workies began to drift away too, muttering to one another, too close together, back-slapping each other big time. And I'll bet they weren't from the one family either. "They don't know their FACTS," I said to the missus, but she had other things to worry about, what with the baby and all.

I could hear music in the distance. "I'll bet there's more than three households where *that's* coming from," I said. But my missus was asleep, and so was the bairn.

So I dug some wet wipes out of my coat pocket and gave my hands a good going over. "Not as good as sanitising gell," the Professor had said. But it would

have to do. It was all I had. And I wanted to find out what the three suits had left – in the briefcase, the bag and the box. So I slipped out of the Landrover to retrieve the goodies.

And, blow me, didn't the music get even louder. I looked at the missus and the bairn curled up in the back of the truck. "It's goin' to be some night," I said to myself – as if it hadn't been some night already ...

***Tom Gordon, Advent 2020***