

NEWSLETTER – November/December 2021

As we approach the end of another year, yet again the outlook for the start of the coming year is unclear. Please keep an eye on our website, Facebook page and emails for any news which may affect our groups. For January's monthly meeting we are going back to having a Mirthy presentation using Zoom, in recognition of the fact that many members are understandably wary of attending face-to-face meetings with Omicron around.

To try to spread some seasonal good cheer however, this newsletter features two items sure to put a smile on your face. The first is a short story by Guy Caplin, a leader of our Creative Writing group. Many thanks to Guy for inviting us to share this with everyone. The second is *A Covid Christmas*, a poem forwarded to me by Mel McMahon who leads our Board Games and Quiz groups. We have tried to track down the original author without success, but he or she deserves congratulations for their efforts.

On behalf of all the committee, we wish you a very merry Christmas and a good new year.

Rod Marshall

Christmas 2021 fundraising quiz

There is still time (just!) to have a go at our second Christmas fundraising quiz. For a donation of £2 (or more), you and your family can have fun and be in with the chance of winning a gift token if yours is the highest scoring entry received by the end of the year.

Full details can be found at www.basingstokeu3a.org/quiz

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Now give us some figgy pudding

by Guy Caplin

My mother's cooking was famous, but not in the way that *she* thought. My brother and I suffered in silence throughout our childhood as her exotic creations played havoc with our digestive systems. Now, I have a home of my own, on the other side of the country, I can escape her worst efforts, except for high days and holidays.

I had come back to my old home to spend a couple of days helping my mother prepare for Christmas before returning to the West Country to celebrate with my partner. One of my duties had been to act as a galley slave and bottle washer as she mixed, blended, boiled and baked the most unlikely ingredients into inedible dishes.

Her pièce de résistance was her grandmother's figgy pudding. This recipe had been passed down through the generations and, according to her, was a firm family favourite. It had to be served piping hot in order to get a spoon into it. Once it cooled, it set, and my brother claimed he had broken a tooth trying to eat it when cold.

It was coming to the end of my stay. A neat row of bowls with their tops covered in bright red gingham cloths, each containing a figgy pudding, stood to attention on the kitchen table, ready to be distributed to unsuspecting neighbours. I had an even bigger bowl in my shopping bag with all my mother's other culinary gifts that I would take home and dump in the nearest dustbin. Four cauldrons of various sizes bubbled, glooped, and frothed on the stove while the embodiment of Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver rolled into one ticked off items from her list.

'Oh, no,' she cried, looking up, horrified at what she had found. 'The Mexican stuffing. I have forgotten to get the ingredients.'

'What do you need?' I asked, frankly surprised as every kitchen cupboard, the fridge, and the freezer was bursting at the seams.

'Oh darling, Mexican stuffing is a blend of liver, chocolate, chilli, and prunes.' she said as if this were a fact everyone ought to know.

From behind his newspaper, my father stifled a groan.

'Keep an eye on the pots, darling. Your father can run me down to the shops in the car.'

They had not been gone more than a couple of minutes when there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find a neighbour, Mr Green, from the rundown, old cottage on the end of the road.

'Hello me dear. Is your mother in?' he asked.

'Sorry, you have just missed her. Can I help you?'

'Well, I wonder if you could now give us some figgy pudding. It is truly wonderful stuff. She gave us some earlier, and I know it's a cheek, but could I have some more?'

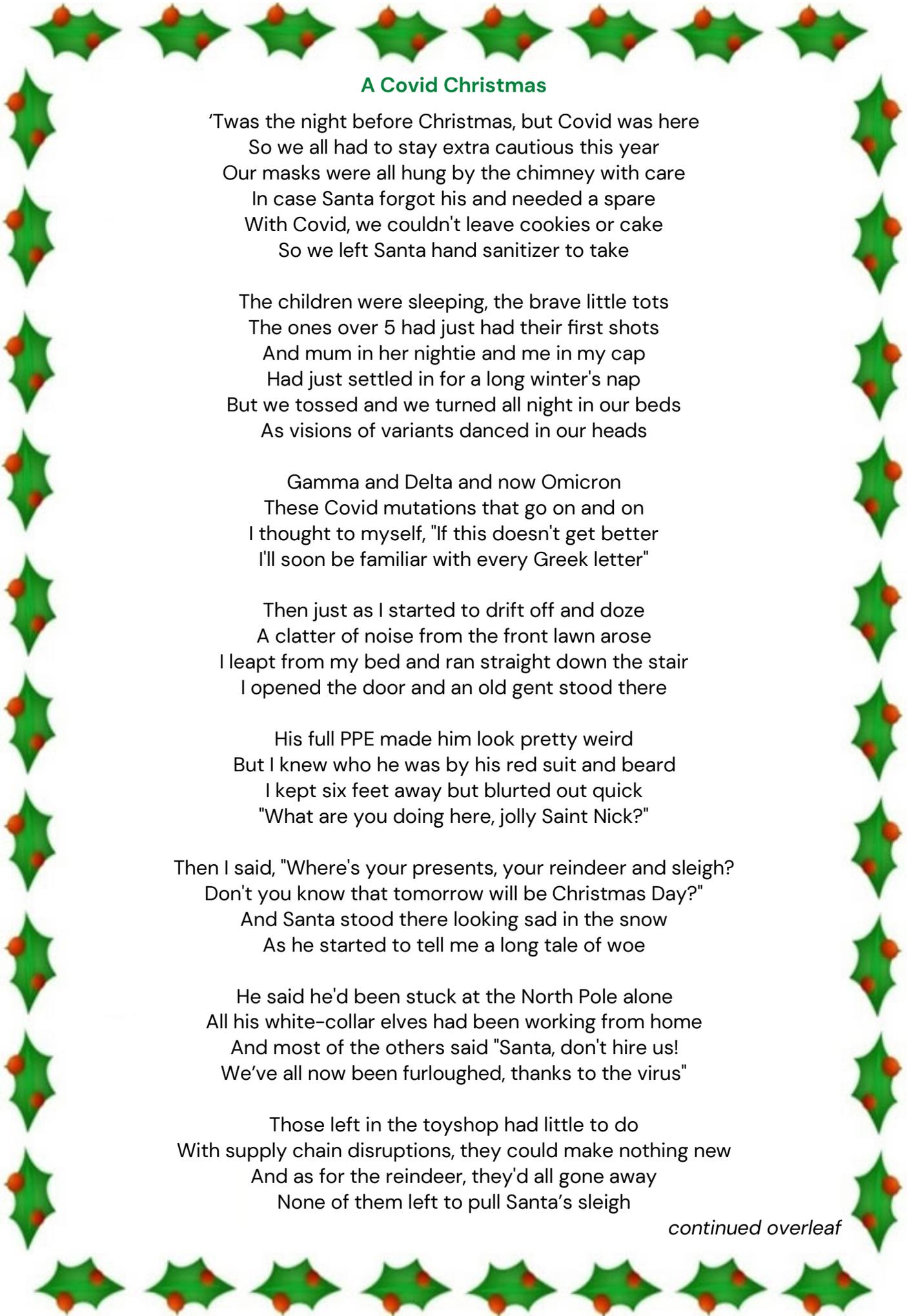
Mr Green had never struck me as a complete idiot, but I began to wonder. Then it occurred to me: I could dispose of my own figgy pudding rather than ship it a hundred miles and then dump it.

'Yes, of course.' I handed the man my over-large gingham-topped bowl.

His eyes lit up. 'Oh, what a big one. That will be absolutely ideal: it will keep the family clear of colds, coughs and flu the entire winter.'

This was intriguing. 'Really?'

He smiled. 'The secret is in the way you heat it. I bung it in the microwave on full and blast it until it starts bubbling. Then I whip it out and trowel it on the cracks in the roof tiles. It keeps out the wind and the rain a treat.'



A Covid Christmas

'Twas the night before Christmas, but Covid was here
So we all had to stay extra cautious this year
Our masks were all hung by the chimney with care
In case Santa forgot his and needed a spare
With Covid, we couldn't leave cookies or cake
So we left Santa hand sanitizer to take

The children were sleeping, the brave little tots
The ones over 5 had just had their first shots
And mum in her nightie and me in my cap
Had just settled in for a long winter's nap
But we tossed and we turned all night in our beds
As visions of variants danced in our heads

Gamma and Delta and now Omicron
These Covid mutations that go on and on
I thought to myself, "If this doesn't get better
I'll soon be familiar with every Greek letter"

Then just as I started to drift off and doze
A clatter of noise from the front lawn arose
I leapt from my bed and ran straight down the stair
I opened the door and an old gent stood there

His full PPE made him look pretty weird
But I knew who he was by his red suit and beard
I kept six feet away but blurted out quick
"What are you doing here, jolly Saint Nick?"

Then I said, "Where's your presents, your reindeer and sleigh?
Don't you know that tomorrow will be Christmas Day?"
And Santa stood there looking sad in the snow
As he started to tell me a long tale of woe

He said he'd been stuck at the North Pole alone
All his white-collar elves had been working from home
And most of the others said "Santa, don't hire us!
We've all now been furloughed, thanks to the virus"

Those left in the toyshop had little to do
With supply chain disruptions, they could make nothing new
And as for the reindeer, they'd all gone away
None of them left to pull Santa's sleigh

continued overleaf



Dasher and Dancer were in quarantine
Prancer and Vixen refused the vaccine
Comet and Cupid were in ICU
So were Donner and Blitzen, they may not pull through

And Rudolph's career can't be resurrected
With his shiny red nose, they all think he's infected
Even with his old sleigh, Santa couldn't go far
Every border to cross needs a new PCR

Santa sighed as he told me how nice it would be
If children could once again sit on his knee
He couldn't care less if they're naughty or nice
But they'd have to show proof that they'd had their shot twice

But then the old twinkle returned to his eyes
And he said that he'd brought me a Christmas surprise
When I unwrapped the box and opened it wide
Starlight and rainbows streamed out from inside

Some letters whirled round and flew up to the sky
And they spelled out a word that was 40 feet high
There first was an H, then an O, then a P
Then I saw it spelled HOPE when it added the E

"Christmas magic" said Santa as he smiled through his beard
Then suddenly all of the reindeer appeared
He jumped into his sleigh and waved me goodbye
Then he soared o'er the rooftops and into the sky

I heard him exclaim as he drove out of sight
"Get your vaccines my friends, Merry Christmas, good night"
Then I went back to bed and a sweet Christmas dream
Of a world when we'd finished with Covid 19



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