

The Man In The Smiling Mask - by John Winter

Frank looked into the small mirror which was propped up against a book on the table. A partially-masked face peered back at him.

“Too white,” he thought. “Too unfriendly. Too Chinese.”

Removing the mask, he picked up a marker pen. He had placed two packs, in assorted colours, in his trolley at Morrison’s some weeks earlier. Before the shelves had been stripped bare. ‘*Buy One – Get One Free.*’ He could never resist a bargain. And he was sure one day they’d come in useful.

Copying from the screen of his I-phone, he carefully inked an emoji onto the fabric. A round, smiley face. In red.

Replacing the mask, Frank looked at himself again. The emoji smiled back at him. Behind his mask Frank smiled too. Much better.

The previous evening, as on every evening since 23rd March, he’d watched the latest Coronavirus update. Deaths in hospital had topped 900, and were still rising.

“There will always be exceptions,” said the Chief Medical Officer, standing behind his wooden lectern, “but current figures indicate that Covid-19 is mainly a threat to the over 70’s and those with underlying health problems.”

For a man like Frank, born in 1939 on the very day Germany invaded Poland and under orders from his doctor to take seven tablets each morning, that was not much comfort. But he felt well, despite a niggling cough. And the day was warm. So maybe that was why he was feeling so hot.

Frank’s friend, Annie, had called in earlier that morning to find him standing at the sink in the kitchen, soaping his hands and singing to himself.

“Zhu ni shengri kuaile. Zhu ni shengri kuaile. Zhu ni shengri kuaile. Zhu ni shengri kuaile.”

“What the heck’s that, Frank?”

“Happy birthday to you. In Chinese. I looked it up on Wikipedia. It fits the tune perfectly. And it reminds me that’s where all this nonsense started. What with their wet markets and the strange things they insist on eating.” Frank coughed, then repeated the song. “You need to sing it twice, Boris said. Before he got ill. Otherwise your hands won’t be properly clean. Maybe he didn’t follow the rules. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Annie shook her head and laughed. “You come up with some crazy things, Frank Partridge, I’ll say that for you. Do you want anything to eat while I’m here? Or shall I just put this food I picked up for you in the fridge?”

“In the fridge is fine, thanks. Could you pass the towel?”

Annie took a red towel from its hook. 'You'll Never Walk Alone' was written across it.

"Shame there's no football on the TV," she said.

"Can't be helped." Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Football's got to take a back seat when people's lives are at stake. But if they try and use it as an excuse to stop Liverpool winning the title there'll be hell to pay. I was beginning to think I wouldn't live to see it happen."

"We're all Blues in our house. So we try not to think about it." Annie smiled to herself as she opened the fridge. "Have you heard from the kids?"

"We FaceTime every morning. Steve at ten thirty. And then Peter at eleven. Little Emily's usually there when Peter calls too. She doesn't say much, but just seeing her happy little face cheers me up. It's difficult to believe, but she'll be three next week. It's one of the silver linings of this miserable business. The family are worried I'll catch it and pop me clogs. So they keep in touch."

The fridge door clicked shut. "Okay Frank. I'll be off. If you need anything just give me a ring." Still wearing her blue, protective gloves, Annie reached out and opened the back door. "Same time next week?"

"Same time next week. Stay safe."

"You stay safe too, Frank."

"I'll be fine." He opened one of the kitchen drawers and held up a square of plain, white fabric. A tape dangled from each corner. "You see I've found this old surgical mask."

Later that day, at about four o'clock, Frank donned the mask, now sporting its smiling emoji, and wandered out into the front garden. He stood by the gate, watching the world go by. Late April. The trees across the road were heavy with pink and white blossom and the sky was clear blue. For the time of year it was unusually warm and sunny. A glorious spring. It had been that way almost since the start of the lockdown.

Neighbours passed along the road, in ones and twos, taking their permitted daily exercise. Mostly they waved and smiled at him. Adversity, it seemed, was good for community spirit.

Frank waved back. And his emoji smiled at them.

It was Thursday. The sun was dropping low, and the cooler air was making him cough. He felt tired, and a little short of breath. He turned and walked back up the path. Five o'clock was tea-time, but he wasn't hungry. A comforting hot chocolate, with a generous slug of medicinal brandy, would make a good nightcap. He'd miss tonight's eight o'clock clapping for the N.H.S. But he'd sleep long and well.

Down in London, at exactly ten thirty the next morning, Frank's son, Steve, picked up his I-pad and pressed 'FaceTime'. In Ormskirk, on a white-painted, bedside table, an I-phone rang out, unanswered. It had been a hefty dose of brandy and Frank lay still. His skin pale, and his chest hardly moving.

Three months earlier, over five thousand miles away in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Dr Li Wenliang, had been warning his medical colleagues to take care. He'd seen a new, and dangerous, illness. Not long before he died - a victim of the novel virus he had recognised - he had signed a confession. He had been making false comments that severely disturbed the social order.

The invisible genie was out of the bottle.