

## The Masked Traveller

On February 23, 2021, I got an email from a Gmail address. It said: *“As you may or may not know, Tony and I got engaged last January, and originally had planned to get married back in November of 2020, but with COVID, we decided to postpone to November 20, 2021.*

*As we have started to plan again, we need to decide on a priest to marry us at Old St Patrick’s Church in Chicago. I immediately thought of you and how incredibly special it would be to have you preside our ceremony/mass. I know this is a huge ask, and given our current state, I know a lot is up in the air right now. But, would love to hop on Zoom or Facetime to chat about it if you are open to the potential idea of making a trip to Chicago“*

I thought to myself: Who in their right mind would want to get married in November in Chicago in the middle of winter. Then I realized it was my godchild, Katie Kerr marrying Tony Gabriel.

In March 2020, then President Trump decreed that European passport holders should be prohibited from visited the United States because of Covid 19. President Biden recommitted that policy continue. On Monday, September 20 came an announcement, allowing European passport holders the freedom to visit the United States as of beginning November 8<sup>th</sup>.

Due to Covid, I had not gone more than fifty miles from home and now I was being invited to journey over three thousand miles as a masked traveller amid a plane load of other masked travellers.

Before travelling across the pond to Chicago, some important business needed attention. A negative Covid test within seventy-two hours of departure was necessary, along with a Covid Passport Certificate indicating one was fully vaccinated.

Having accumulated all the necessary paperwork and results, I headed to the airport to begin the journey of over eight hours that would take me to the Windy City.

I inserted a paper copy of my Boarding Pass into the kiosk, followed instructions about placing my bag on the scale. It spouted out a baggage tag that I duly affixed to my luggage and brought it to the bag drop off area.

A gentleman asked me to show him my Verifly App to make sure I had uploaded all my necessary documentations, including negative Covid result. Being satisfied, he punched in a code into the machine and out spouted a verification number for my bag drop. I was on my way through security screening. Customs and Immigration.

At security screening, I was not lucky enough not to have reached the age of seventy-five whereas I wouldn’t need to take off my shoes for the screening. Onto American Customs and Immigration for more screening and finger printing. Then, it was onto boarding gate.

The flight to Chicago was full. The Flight Attendants continued to warn the passengers that mask wearing was obligatory during the entire flight except for mealtime. There were to be no congregating in the aisles and no lining up to use the lavatories.

On arrival in Chicago, there was a mad dash to the baggage carousel and a quick exit to meet with long unseen family members or business associates.

There, at the baggage carousel, I was to encounter a mob melee of jostling for positions by the carousel as baggage from four different international flights piled onto the carousel. Social distancing was not existent. People pushed and shoved their way to a better vantage point by the carousel.

It was then, that something happened the caught my attention and the attention of any waiting patiently to collect their luggage. A tall, muscular, line backer-built man, stood by the revolving carousel, making sure that none of the bags dropped off the carousel. He took one precariously leaning large bag, raised it up to arms length and threw it back onto the belt. A young man standing beside him began to

chastise his, indicating that the bag belonged to a traveller and should not be handled the way it was handled. The line-back got irate, pulled down his mask and began to lecture the complainer. The atmosphere became hushed and tense. It was then, I heard someone near me say, "Now, you know you are in America."

It was then that I realised that Covid had brought an edginess to life and relationships, deep-seated tensions as well as pent up anger, frustration, lack of control, disappearance of normality. I realised that all of us were masked travellers through life trying to cope with strange emotions and feelings which we didn't invite into our lives.

Then, I heard a familiar voice behind me say, "Fr. Mike." It was Katie, the young woman who, as her godfather, invited me to Chicago to witness her wedding to her soulmate, Tony.