

27 Across by Jonathan Hall, *written for the Covid and Me – Vaccine Monologues* (Theatre of Debate/NIHR/Leeds University).

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by Jonathan Hall

SHEILA IS IN LATE FIFTIES.
SHE'S SORT OF PERSON WHO GETS FLUSTERED IF SHE HASN'T GOT THE
RIGHT CHANGE IN SHOPS- THOUGH IN THESE DAYS OF CONTACTLESS
PAYING THERE'S LESS CHANCE FOR THAT FLUSTER-MENT TO SHOW
BEYOND A NERVOUS SMILE.

AFTER HER DIAGNOSIS OF CANCER TWO YEARS AGO SHE PRETTY MUCH
STOPPED WORKING IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL OFFICE WHERE SHE'D
WORKED SINCE LEAVING SCHOOL. AND AS SHE'LL SAY HERSELF- SHE
MISSES THE PEOPLE BUT SHE DOESN'T MISS THE STROPPY PARENTS OR
COUNTING THE DINNER MONEY.

DIVORCED MANY YEARS AGO, TWO CHILDREN, ONE IN BLACKPOOL AND
ONE DOWN SOUTH- THEY AIM TO PHONE EVERY FORTNIGHT, BUT THEY'RE
BUSY BOTH PEOPLE WITH THEIR LIVES TO LIVE AND IF IT DOESN'T
HAPPEN, IT DOESN'T HAPPEN.

SINCE LOCKDOWN- WELL, NOT A LOT'S CHANGED REALLY AS SHE'D GOT
USED TO BEING IN THE FLAT. ONLINE SHOPPING AND A DEVELOPING
PASSION FOR 'THE YORKSHIRE VET' AND A CAST IRON EXCUSE TO
PRACTICE THE NERVOUS LIVING THAT'S BEEN HER NATURAL TENDENCY
SINCE HER ILLNESS AND TREATMENT

SHE'S WEARING GYM KIT READY FOR HER ONLINE KEEP FIT CLASS.

Sheila

Mr Hammad; he always used to say with crossword clues there's three types
of answers

The ones you definitely know

The ones you definitely don't

And then- there's the ones you can work out

With the right bits of information

And all in all I've found it's not a bad approach to life's problems

Especially now

You see I've got this bit of a problem going on

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But I **think** I've got enough of the right bits of information
To do what Jodie Bash always says:

Let go and leap

I **think**

(BUT SHE'S WORRIED. SHE NEEDS TO TALK IT THROUGH)

So: our exercise group

Silver Bums and Tums

Virtual since the start of lockdown but still going strong

Half a dozen of us diehards- 'The Saggy Six' we call ourselves-

There's me- Jodie Bash- Mrs P (knee permitting)- Lenny, Botox Jan-

And of course our chap who organises it all

Brian

Or Bran-flakes Brian as Jodie Bash calls him

Anyway, now things seem to have been settling down a bit Covid-wise he'd
been to have a word with the people at the Leisure Centre.

See about getting us UN-virtual again

Because there's the Brownlees Gym- great big barn of a place

Space enough for all the social distancing you could want-

So when we all logs on- you could tell he had something to say just by
looking at him-

'Greetings Chaps and Chappesses' he says- that's how he talks. 'I have
tidings'

Jodie Bash sends me a 'rolling eyes' emoticon

Anyway, it turns out we're out of luck as the gymnasium has been
commandeered by this lot of people running a (SHE'S CAREFUL WITH THE
WORDS) Covid Vaccination trial. Trying out one of these vaccines you hear
about.

So we all thought that's it.

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But it wasn't.

Not by a long chalk.

You see it turns out he's got talking to the people running this trial- helps them guide their van into the parking space-

And he's found out all the about this trial

And how they need folks to volunteer

So he's only gone and says us lot- Silver Bums and Tums- would be interested as volunteering as Vaccine Trail Participants.

Talk about Kerfuffle!

There's Lenny shouting 'what about GDPR?' all over the shop- and Brian's trying to explain he just said we **might** be interested- but he's not for listening isn't Lenny.

Truth be told everyone's got something to say-

Because with vaccination- well, we all think that's where they infect you with whatever it is they want a cure for-

That's what everyone thinks-

In the end he has to put us on mute so we can all speak one at a time.

There's Botox Jane- 'what about my asthma?' she says.

'What about her bottom?' texts Jodie Bash. And it's true, there's no sign of this famous weight loss, she must be sixteen stone if she's an ounce.

And then there's Jodie herself with her diabetes. She's got it well under control- more or less- but even so.

Not to mention Mrs P with her parents and his parents living with them- and now his auntie- none of them this side of 80-

In fact none of us are spring chickens- and truth be told none of us feel happy with the idea of being injected with goodness knows what

Certainly not me

I mean I know it's been over a year- and the last tests were all A okay-

'Full Marks Sheila'- that's what Dr Chaudhry said-

'You go and get on with your life'

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But- well- you hear of it coming back all the time...

Anyway by now everyone's kicking off

Saying what they think

Not helped by Lenny shouting "What about 5G masts?" every time there's a pause.

So then Brown Bread Brian goes into full 'I was a Parish Councillor for 32 years' mode-

The group, he says need to Step Up to The Plate

Like we did over the new drinks machine

Didn't we realise it's a matter of life and death?

Big Mistake

Jodie Bash sends over one of her throwing up emoticons but I know where she's coming from

A matter of life and death

Because the truth is, at our age, pretty much everything is a matter of life and death-

Decaf tea, Pilates- avoiding Lidl on a Saturday

It's all more or less about staying on the perch

And despite **Bran Flakes Brian** telling us all it's perfectly safe it's much much safer to sit tight.

Especially when you've been through what I've been through

It's like Jodie Bash says later- let some other buggar stick their head over the parapet

(SHE TAKES A DEEP BREATH)

But.

Well- sitting here, thinking- my mind keeps going back to something Mr Hammad used to say

When we were sat there in the ward, side by side, doing our puzzles

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“Don’t be the unsolved problem” he’d say “Be the one finding the answer”

(REMEMBERS)

Hours we’d be sat there me and him

Drips in our arms

Sharing the flask of hot chocolate I’d bring in for us.

Him with his Telegraph general knowledge, me with my Bella puzzle page

Mrs Sheila he used to call me

Not that we ever said that much

But seeing him sat there on the ward

It always used to bring a smile to my face

I didn’t even know he’d died

Not at first

I mean, why would I, it’s not as though we were related and back then in the first wave everything was all over the shop anyhow

It was Mrs P who told me.

She knew someone who knew someone

That sort of thing

And I know I couldn’t have gone to the funeral even if they were allowing people-

And I sometimes catch myself wondering... was he on his own? Was he scared?

I’ll never know.

One of the things I definitely don’t know.

But- there’s things I can definitely find out-

And **have** found out thanks to T’internet

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Like you **don't** get Covid from whatever it is they're injecting you with for these trials

Like it **doesn't** matter if you are diabetic or asthmatic or the wrong side of 16 stone

Because those are exactly the sort of people they need to make sure the vaccine works on

(SMILES) Even the Lennys and their conspiracy theories

And even people who've had cancer

And they want

No they **need**

People like me to put their head above the parapet

(SHE'S REACHED HER DECISION)

So that's what I'm going to do

I don't know everything- of course I don't, no-one does

But I'm going to go online and I'm going to tell the group

I'm going to let go and leap.