

HUGS by Judith Johnson, written for the Covid and Me – Vaccine Monologues (Theatre of Debate/NIHR/Leeds University).

MANDY is a white working-class woman in her 50s. She is the mother of two adult children, both in their early twenties: one studying at University in the same town where they live and living at home to save money; the other a recent graduate, also living at home. The family live in a high-rise block of flats. Mandy was put on furlough from her job in Greggs during lockdown and has not returned to work. Mandy and her son are now on benefits, her daughter has a student loan. Mandy is a kind, tolerant, person with a down to earth sense of humour. She is also overweight, smokes and has diabetes.

MANDY

It's a funny feeling, not wanting to hug your own kids. Specially when it's usually the other way round, you know (*MIMICKING HER KIDS*) 'Gerroff me! Leave me alone!'

My baby, I say baby, she's 21, she came in the other night, fresh from the outdoor pub, she said 'I luv you Mother, you daft old cow,' launched herself into me arms, then burst into tears. She was having a bit of trouble in her love life.

She didn't notice me leaning to the side and turning me head away, she didn't see me trying not to breathe.

Socially distancing me own offspring, that's what I'm doing.

I've always been a bit . . . scared of things. 'Risk averse' my son calls it, he studied 'Psychology.' (*SHE ROLLS HER EYES, SMILES*).

Why don't you just go out, he says. Get out of this flat and meet a friend for a walk. Just wear a mask, keep a distance, you'll be fine!

I was bad enough before. Checking, double checking, triple checking the cooker before I left the flat, you know, after what happened at Grenfell. Demanding all the details of where the kids were going, who they were going to be with, what time they'd be back, had they got their key, had they got their phone.

Now it's have you got your mask, have you got your hand gel as well.

Now it's wash your hands as soon as you come in, use your own towel, where've you been, did you keep a distance, how many people were there. Following them round with an anti-septic spray.

It's no life for people in their twenties, is it?

Ollie who lives on the 15th floor, he came round with a leaflet. It was asking for volunteers to do clinical trials for a COVID vaccine. He lost his Dad to COVID, he nearly lost his Mum. We've been in a bubble with them since she was in hospital, cos he's got autism, you know, he needed a bit of looking after. They both did really.

Anyway, Ollie's Mum did a trial for a COVID treatment while she was ill, and Ollie, he's learnt everything you can possibly know about trials now, he's very keen on them, and he's trying to persuade people to take part in this vaccine trial.

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My baby, she was up for it straight away. It's our duty to help, she said. My boy, he said he *would* do it, but he also said actually Mum, it's people like *you* they need most, people who wouldn't normally do a trial.

'People like me.' He meant terrified middle-aged women with diabetes and a 20 a day habit.

They need to know how the vaccine works on all sorts of different bodies, he said.

'Different bodies.' He meant fat bodies, like mine.

It's not gonna happen. I can't even bring meself to leave the flat.

Ollie came back today.

He's such a good boy, he washes his hands soon as he comes in, he sits on the other side of the room, he's careful not to touch any surfaces. I notice all this now, I'm obsessed with the details.

He said, 'Will you sign up for the vaccine trials Mandy?' I said I was too scared. He said why, have you got any questions, ask me any questions, I know a *lot* about it.

They're rushing it through, I said, they're cutting corners, they're not doing it properly.

They're not rushing it, he said. They're being very careful with people, they're looking after them very well. It's just all them meetings they usually have, all the red tape and all that, they're not doing that. That's where they're saving time. Because it's a top priority!

Anymore questions, he asked.

I didn't really have any. I'm not one of them anti-vaxxers you hear about, I don't think they're trying to inject microchips into us, I don't think they're using us as guinea pigs, I'm just scared. I'm 'risk averse.' And there *is* a tiny risk of something going wrong. That's why they do these trials, Ollie said. To find out about the side effects. But by this point, stage 3, they've already trialled it on lots of people, he said, so it is only a tiny risk.

I told Ollie about not wanting to hug the kids. There's just something about him, he doesn't judge people or take the micky out of them, I felt like I could tell him anything. He said, I'm not a big one for hugs meself Mandy, but if you did this trial, if the vaccine worked, you could hug your kids all you like couldn't you? You could have a massive big huddle.

I couldn't fault his logic. That's what most people want, isn't it? And why not me? If we all waited for someone else to volunteer we'd *never* have a vaccine.

But I'm still too scared.

Ollie and his Mum have invited me out for a walk round the park next week.

I will go I think. I need to be brave.

So that's a start. Then after that, we'll see . . .