

Carrots and Marigolds by Jonathan Hall, written for the *Covid and Me – Research Monologues* (Theatre of Debate/NIHR/Leeds University).

Carrots and Marigolds

By Jonathan Hall

(ED IS IN HIS EARLY SEVENTIES.)

Ed: So I decided

(RECALLING) I was up the allotment this morning

As soon as I get there Hilary's head pops up over the hedge.

"You better have a look at your carrots," she says. That tone of voice she uses.

Marigolds.

Growing all in amongst the carrots.

"I'd help sort them," says Madam "But of course with social distancing."

Again- that tone of voice. "Of course you know when it's from."

Of course I do.

It was that last time I managed to get Bhav up here under his own steam.

And it was a lovely day- first day when I didn't need my coat-

and Bhav had got what Dr Bish called 'one of his bees in his bonnet'- This time it was the planting. Had to plant the seeds. Had to. Buzzing about all over the shop he was.

These days he can barely manage with a frame.

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And I kept saying to him leave the seeds to me but Zhy was there, in full on “agree never argue” mode.

“Just make sure he has the right seeds and he’ll be fine,” she says.

“It was that day with your Zhy, wasn’t it?” says Hilary. She’s never taken to Zhy, not since that time she put her right about David Icke.

Anyway, I’m looking at the mess when I get the text- I have the tone on extra loud so I don’t miss it- and up pop’s Madam’s head.

“Lovage House?” she says. To be fair she’s as scared as me; she’s a sister and two cousins in there. They haven’t had any cases yet, but it’s only a matter of time.

“It’s okay,” I say. “Just the surgery. Asking if I want to be part of that trial thing.”

“Now you just be careful,” she says

Be careful. Hilary Thwaite’s all-purpose comment on everything from orthopaedic wheelbarrows to liquid seaweed.

“You know what I think,” she says- and I do chapter and verse.

...once your names on a database it’s never off

...do I really want to be pumped full of drugs they don’t know about?

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...did I not hear about that case a few years back when six people nearly died.

She's still holding forth when Zhy poles up.

"Hey-up Hil," she shouts.

"I hope you're being socially distant," says Hilary.

"You want to watch out," says Zhy- "I just came past that 5G mast up Shay lane. 7 people on the ground, choking and grabbing their throats."

"I'm glad you can laugh" says Madam.

Zhy looks at me; she can tell I'm bothered. One of my 'world on shoulders' faces as she calls them.

"Is it Uncle Bhav?" she says.

So I show her the letter, the one from the surgery.

"So?" she says-

"So I'm not sure," I say.

"You saw Doctor Bish, what did he say?"

To be truthful I hadn't taken it all in. He's nice enough is Doctor Bish- but always so strapped for time - and with my waterworks appointment being online, I'd enough on with that.

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“And it says here,” says Zhy “You got an email that giving you links to other information.”

To be honest I’ve rather shied away from the whole email thing since that business with Bhav and Bitcoin.

“There’s just something about trying something I don’t know,” I say

“That’s the whole point of a clinical trial Uncle Ed.” She starts on the runner beans. “So they can find out.”

I’m not convinced.

“It’s like you with Uncle Bhav. First you tried jigsaws, that didn’t work- photo albums were a bit better, so you tried more of them. It’s the same principle.”

It’s then she sees the carrots and the marigolds. She bursts out laughing.

“And sometimes,” she says “You get a result nobody was expecting.”

“There’s something about me about trying drugs,” I say.

She gives me that gesture of peace she does since she’s not been able to hug me. “It might not even be about taking drugs. It can be anything- interviews, physical tests. And if it is drugs- you can be sure they’re 100% safe, and you’ll be well looked after. Better, ‘cos they’re checking up on you every verse end.”

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We both look at the carrot bed and all them chuffing marigolds. “Time to step forward Uncle Ed,” she said.

Step forward. Because all these years I’ve not, I’ve stepped back. We both have, me and Bhav. Kept our heads down, kept ourselves to ourselves.

That’s when the phone pings a second time.

Magda at Lovage House.

My hands are shaking so much I can hardly work the blumin thing.

But it’s okay, the text just says “Good afternoon” and there’s Bhav and it must be activities cause he’s holding a big tray of plants, big silly grin on his face.

I put the phone on the bin for Zhy and Hilary to see.

I think we all had a bit of a moment.

“Okay,” I said “Okay. I’m going to do it.” And Zhy thumps the lid of the garden waste bin. “Pioneering hero,” she shouts.

“Anyway,” she says. “I better make a start sorting out your carri-golds.”

“No,” I said. “Leave them.”