

Friends or Lovers?
Part 2: Dave's Tale

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Chapter 1

Penny Leyton! Don't talk to me about Penny Leyton – that stupid, prejudiced, supercilious bitch of a woman ruined my career and now she's rubbing salt in the wounds by spreading lies. Sorry! Sorry! I'm normally quiet and reserved, but whenever I think of her then the anger just wells up and expletives pour out of my mind. I wanted to sue her, but a friend suggested a much better idea. Here it is! Where on earth do I start?

Who am I? I'm Dave Stockton. At the time I was 35, married, with a 5-year-old daughter called Briany. I'm the smuck who was persuaded – or more accurately ordered – to recruit a woman as the Head of Human Resources so that Innovation Centre Ltd could become a touchy-feely gender-sensitive employer. What a load of PC tosh that was, and we got our just deserts – a sanctimonious singleton telling people twice her age how to conduct their private lives while secretly shacking up with a guy old enough to be her father! What a farce it all was.

I can't believe what she wrote about me, “...*he engaged with women as equals and was sympathetic to many of the problems they faced...*” What a load of shit - I was terrified to say anything in case she tried to break my balls. And then later she says, “...*he enjoyed working with me but was careful never to overstep the mark or make me feel uncomfortable.*” Most of the time I hated working with her, but upon pain of death – or more precisely upon fear of Harry's boot in my rear - I had to behave as if she could do no wrong. Actually, there was a short period – it only lasted a couple of months - when she showed signs of humanity, but it disappeared quickly. I do not know why, but during that period I wondered whether she might actually be capable of friendship, even love, rather than acting out the Hollywood *prima donna*. Still, I'm getting ahead of myself – all these events will unfold in due course.

I guess I should start about 10 years before, when I worked for one of those charities that helped Africans during time of famine – the place I met my wife, Anita. If I'd known at the time what I learnt later, I would have turned my steering wheel and driven as fast as possible in the opposite direction. If you read Penny's book, you'd imagine I had a happy home life. Actually, I had a sorry excuse of a marriage but, like all guys, I was a sucker for an attractive woman who wanted sex without uttering the swear word “commitment”. I just wish that when she uttered the other one (“marriage”) that I'd had the courage to say “no”. By then we were getting on so well and enjoying the sex so much that I let my guard drop. Shallow? Yeah, I admit it.

I was a geek – a late developer. Shorter, less confident and sporty than any of my friends, I did at least have a quiet and tenacious intellect. Penny said I was “fantastic at building trust” - she was at least right about that. God, I hated my football obsessed, beer-drinking friends, particularly their smooth talking around women. When they started discussing their conquests, I just wanted to get a

piece of wire and choke them with it. Yeah, okay, I was jealous, I admit it. My way of coping was to retreat into a silent world of thought. Anita, my wife, changed all that.

* * *

Anita was one of our project leaders. The first time we talked, I was covering for a colleague who handled corporate sponsorship and intercepted her anguished calls.

“Dave, what am I to do? I’m in this fly infested shit hole with no medicine, people dying around me, no money to eat properly or buy clothes and everyone says there is nothing they can do! Pleeeeaasssee,” she said persuasively, “pleeeaaassee don’t make me call again!”

“But I want you to call again, you have a nice voice!” I said cheekily.

I heard a small chuckle on the other end of the phone so I offered to help.

“Tell you what, let me march into the board meeting and demand the Chairman take your call!”

“Could ya?” she asked.

At home, or out on the town, I was a consummate wimp with women, but over the phone I could set this aside and behave in an entirely different way. The “chairman”, or more accurately Liam our Overseas Development Manager, was not in a board meeting but eating his sandwich with Samantha, the office flirt. I put the phone on hold.

“Liam!” I waved the phone at him but he did not respond.

“Oy!” I shouted loudly, “Tall one in the corner stuffing his face and trying it on with Sam!”

Still Liam did not respond, but Sam’s head jerked as she heard her name. She nudged Liam and eventually he caught my eye.

“What?” he shouted across the office.

I beckoned him to come over to the phone and explained that Anita had called four times about supplies. He rolled his eyes and walked over.

“What does the tart want?” he asked.

I had never met Anita so I did not know whether his description was accurate. I imagined that it was probably about as accurate as Liam’s estimation of Sam as a “really nice woman”. I took the phone off hold.

“The ‘tart’ wants to eat something other than toasted Kenyan grasshoppers and wear clothes that don’t look like they’d just been put through the office shredder,” I responded with a big smile.

Liam grunted in contempt and took the phone.

“Hi, Annie!” he said to her. “What’s it this time?”

* * *

“Annie” (she hated the nickname) was closer to Liam’s description than I realised, but I did not discover this until 4 years after we got married. By that time, Briany had been born. I tried to take

it all in my stride and live with the thought that one day I would be free of her. Looking forward, rather than dwelling on what an idiot I had been, enabled me to think of the new and better life I would have one day. Why Anita married me is a mystery. I never fathomed that out, not even when she eventually died. We sat there, life ebbing out of her, and I wondered if I should finally ask her “why?” But I did not. I let her take her thoughts to the next world – I feel sure I would not have wanted to hear the answer.

I found a way to cope. I’d always had a low opinion of myself so when I learnt she must have been seeing another man, I just assumed that this was the sort of thing that would happen to me. Where Briany was concerned it was a different matter. The thought that she might not be mine was hard to deal with so I quietly organised a paternity test. When that came back positive, not only did my life have purpose, I had someone on whom I could focus my future and my love.

I find the world a strange place, full of secrets that no-one dares to utter and everyone telling platitudes to hide them. Some people seem to miss how much others hate them, are jealous of them, play games with them. Even those who appear to be kind usually have some other agenda, to make up for hopelessly low self-esteem or become the local celebrity. There are few real Samaritans in the world and I’m not one of them. I keep my head down, play the game, keep the boss happy, climb the ladder slowly until sufficiently high to shit on the people below. I guess that is why I hate Penny so much. It was she who forced me to see that the world does not have to be like this. I hate her for that.

Chapter 2

I met Anita in 1995. She was in the middle of a three-year project, but was granted leave to come home for her mother's funeral. Always full of demands, she marched into our office to insist on a meeting with Liam. I found him hiding in the gents' toilets – he'd nipped in there as soon as he saw her walking up the street. As I'd already told her that Liam was in work, he had no hope of escaping.

Liam was one of my least favourite people, the kind of guy who ignores you when you walk into his office, does not look at you when he talks to you, and chuckles dismissively whenever you say anything relevant. I once thought of nominating him for a Noel Edmunds type show – he surely would be an easy target and deserved to be humiliated – but instead I decided to save the pleasure for myself whenever I got the chance. This was as good as it would get.

"She's out there waiting!" I told him. "She knows you're in here and won't leave until you meet her."

"Just get rid of her, somehow, Dave. GET RID!"

I was loving this moment. I wondered what Anita must be like to strike such fear into Liam. He never showed any fear to people in the office so she must have some special qualities. After a moment's thought, I went outside.

"He's in there, still. Wants me to get rid of you," I said smiling at Anita.

She cut a fine figure. Although far from pretty, she had a strong sleek body and positively brimmed with confidence. Her olive skin revealed her upbringing; one of her parents must have been Asian or Mediterranean because she looked like she had an all year round tan. Her hair was also dark and today it was fastened into a bun so that the entire length of her cheekbone, and the muscles in her neck, were fully visible as she laughed at the circus that was unfolding. If I had to describe her to you, I would characterise her as a Mediterranean version of Grace Jones. She looked like she could slice a person in two with her eyes, but there was something dark and sexy about her at the same time.

"Y'think I should go in there and get 'im out myself?" she asked.

"Only if I can come in and watch," I replied.

"Yes. I remember you – the cheeky one. Come in if you like!"

I was glad I had made an impression - it made me a bit bolder. The realisation that Anita intended to do Liam some verbal damage (or worse) motivated me to stick close to the action.

"Cheeky?" I interspersed. "Never!"

"Oh, yes!" she replied with a broad deep smile, the kind that people reveal only when they are caught in the grip of spontaneity. She took me by the arm and started to lead me.

“Come with me. If he doesn’t want the meeting out here, we’ll have it in on the loo. You can shove his head down while I flush it.”

I laughed. She was a bad one, all right, and I really liked her for that. I’d never been inside women’s toilets before so for her to stride straight into the men’s toilets was the first of many draw-dropping experiences.

“Liam! Liam!” she shouted as she entered. “Give your willy a good shake and get that tight little arse out here right now, you hear?”

The smirk on my face was broad by now and when she glanced in my direction, I gave her a thumbs up.

“I ain’t going back to Kenya until I’ve got your personal guarantee on those medical supplies.”

The door to a cubicle opened.

“Well, hi there!” she said. “Come join the party!”

My smirk broke into a smile as Liam emerged sheepishly from the toilet.

“Hi there, Anita!” replied Liam. “You’re looking well.”

“Why thank you, Liam. Wish I could say the same for you.”

Liam laughed awkwardly and was momentarily lost for words.

“Shall we adjourn to a meeting room?” he asked.

“Adjourn? I know I’m back in sodding London when I hear language like that!” she responded.

This woman cracked me up big time. I instantly liked anyone who had such disdain for Liam. Not only did she have the confidence to put it into words, she did it with humour as well.

“Yes. Let’s ‘adjourn’ to a meeting room,” she added sarcastically. “Can this one join us?” she said, gesturing in my direction.

Liam did not know what to say for a second.

“What do you want him for?”

Whilst I did not appreciate the way they talked as if I was not there, the prospect of a ringside seat watching them spar eased the upset to my ego.

“Well, he seems to be the only one interested in giving me what I need.”

And then it happened! It was so quick that many would have missed it. As she said the words ‘giving me what I need’ her eyes flicked in my direction for a moment and she gave me a wink. It was only an instant, but enough to give away her interest. Inwardly, I felt a sense of anticipation rip through me.

“I’ll go put some coffee on,” I said with more assertiveness than was usual.

“Liam?” I prompted.

“Yes, thanks,” he replied.

She smiled to me and glanced in my direction again. Then, returning to Liam, her smile disappeared and she proceeded to slice him in two with her stare.

“Liam,” she said coolly before following me, “don’t forget to wash your hands.”

I walked to the kitchen, put on a fresh pot of coffee, then organised a tray with proper cups and saucers. Marcie, the office administrator showed me a private stash of biscuits so that we could at least give the impression that we knew how to cater for guests.

“Thanks. Hope it keeps her sweet!” I said as I took the biscuits.

“Sweet? You gotta be kidding me!” replied Marcie.

Anita had a reputation, clearly, so I ventured a comment.

“Not the sweet type?” I asked.

Marcie smiled.

“Bit of a bad ‘un?” I enquired.

“I ain’t saying **nothin**” answered Marcie, giving away everything I wanted to know.

I liked Anita more and more by the minute.

Tray in hand, I entered the meeting room where Liam and Anita had sat down.

“Him!” she said, pointing to me, clearly finishing off a mini-conversation that had taken place in my absence.

“Why him?” Liam asked again.

She studied me, looked me up and down, and did not seem to mind that Liam was watching.

“He’ll give me what I want. You won’t!”

Awkward as Liam looked, he seemed to have the measure of Anita and started to make noises that to a distant observer would have sounded like conversation, but to those present were absolutely senseless.

“What exactly d’you want him for?” asked Liam.

“Whatever I ask!” she replied fixing her gaze on Liam rather than me.

“Like a personal secretary, you mean?” asked Liam.

As I watched my future unfold in front of me, I actually began to get aroused.

“At least!” she insisted. “When I call this office all I get is your stonewalling. I want someone who’s interested in my problems and will do something ‘bout ‘em.”

Anita was so blunt it was a delight to behold. She cut up Liam with each and every word and then spat him out in little bits. Maybe her instincts were good and she somehow sensed I shared her contempt. Whatever the reason, she latched onto me and before the meeting was finished, it was agreed that I would handle all her requests and have control over half the budget for her project. That is how we came to know each other. Working for her was the happiest period of my miserable life.

By the time she visited again in 1996, we lunched together each day and started to meet after work. She was only in England for a few weeks so we made the most of them. As with everything else in her life, if she wanted something she asked for (or just took) it. When I visited her sister's, moments after I walked through the door, she looked at me and said.

“I think you'll find **that** room most comfortable.”

I opened the door. It was her bedroom. With no further ado, she followed me in, backed me against the bed and ordered me to kiss her. Sex with Anita was amazing, nothing before or since has ever come close.

On the outside we were completely different. In public places, she wore the trousers and I kept a quiet and reserved dignity. But on the inside, we were like two peas in a pod, each sucking life out of each other while plotting against world leaders to make them pay for their cruelty to the world's poor. From then on we kept in daily touch by e-mail. When the project in Kenya finished she returned home to her sister's and our torrid love affair resumed as if we'd parted only the previous day. Then, without warning she demanded I buy her something. Before I knew it, we were engaged; by the time I met Mike at IC, we were married.

* * *

“You're the guy who never swears, aren't you?” asked Mike when we were first introduced.

Mentally, I made a note to pay him back one day, but I was not going to do it now. Did I ever swear? In my head I swore all the time, but when it comes to other people I guess he is right. I don't like swearing – I find it childish and unprofessional. Unfortunately, I had to get used to it because other people swear all the time. If I'm going to write this out, I'll have to tell you the ugly things people said. I guess I'll have to admit some of my ugly thoughts too. But there is no point writing all this out only for some editor to say “you can't say that!” so I guess I'll tone it down a bit. No, no – we can't have the truth. We can't tell it like it is, that would be awful. How would the world function if I wrote on these pages that I thought my MD, Harry, had been an arrogant, pig-headed fuck who only valued people he could screw continuously (literally in the case of women and financially in the case of men). Would I get away with that (I guess I just did if you are reading this)? Harry likes to present himself as Mother Teresa's closest cousin but he is actually the most exploitative person I've ever met. There – I've said the words! Do I feel any better for saying them? No, not at all. But now you know.

Mike and I joined Innovation Centre – or IC for short – to build the sales channels for Harry. I took the job when Anita wanted to move back to Warwickshire - the higher pay also meant we could live together. That was in 1997 – a world ago now. Both Mike and I were brought in to “professionalise” the sales function. I hate that word! What on earth does “professionalise” mean? It always strikes me as a euphemism for artificial informality, a kind of calculated dishonesty

whereby you convince a buyer that you really care while shafting them for as much as possible. What is “professional” to me is unerring honesty – letting the customer or client know when a product or service can or cannot help them, ensuring they only spend what they can afford, but as I mentioned earlier the world does not function like that. Whenever someone tells me they are a “true professional” it conjures up a picture of a righteous git intent on deceiving me.

Unfortunately, Mike was older and more experienced. I had to suffer him as my boss for a few years, but eventually I got out from under his feet. He did not suck up to people – that was his problem – but I was very good at it. By 2000, I was on the same grade working on business development. To people’s faces, I have a knack of saying what they want to hear and Harry realised this was particularly valuable with the most difficult accounts. As for Mike, I had to constantly suffer his honesty. He was a real pain.

“Yes, I don’t swear!” I eventually replied.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying that – the woman in HR was talking about you when I was signing my contract. She said how rare it was.....that you don’t like people swearing.”

I guess others would have gone ‘gosh, really – did they say that?’ but I just made a mental note to give a bollocking to the woman in HR for breaching the confidentiality of my interview.

“No, I don’t mind at all. So you’re new here too?” I asked.

“Yes! Started yesterday. And you?”

He was so genuinely friendly that I wanted to spit.

“Day before!” I lied.

“So you’re an old hand, then?” he quipped.

“Yes – I’ve already pegged the place. Think they’ll go places here. What do you think?”

I wanted to see how smart he was and whether he studied the company before he joined. Did he realise it was a bit of shambles but somewhere it would be easy to make a mark, get the job title on the CV, and then move onto something better?

“Not sure,” he replied. “A lot of work to do, but I like their approach. The idea is good but they have no sales process or structure yet.”

Lots of men talk like this – working out how the world is put together so they can “restructure” it into something better, more lasting, more stable. Waste of time with people like me about but they do not seem to be put off.

“So you think there’s potential here?” I asked inquisitively.

“Only with a lot of work,” he answered. “That’s why I’m here – to put the structure in place, get things going.”

Well, he seemed smart enough, but I remember thinking what a pain it was going to be to have a control freak “structuring” everything. Actually, I got Mike completely wrong. To him, structure

was not an organisation thing - it was a way of relating to people so they trusted you. When he used the word structure, he was talking about something between two people. With people inside work he was prickly but still well liked. You could rely on him to tell you what he thought but he was so earnest that it worried me. He really wanted to “make a difference” and people like that drove me crazy. With customers, he was the same, and there was no denying that people bought more from him as a result. He was a far better salesperson than I was but less good with the slippery customers. That is where I came into my own. I guess it takes one to know one. Still, from his words, it looked like I was talking to my new boss, so I thought I should be polite.

“Oh! That’s good,” I said, offering a half-smile as I did so. “I guess I’ll be working for you, then?” I added.

“Yes, I guess you will,” he replied sincerely.

I hate sincerity, especially from those who actually mean what they say – it always makes me feel so uncomfortable.

When Mike walked away, I had a sense of foreboding, as if my future was being set right there. I got the impression that I would always work for him. In a way I did, whether I meant to or not.

Chapter 3

At the end of 1999, I got my breakthrough at IC and headed up the business development unit. Harry had found that if he could persuade inventors to fund their own development work and market their products through our company, IC could make more money than simply acting as a distributor. In this way, we moved beyond marketing products to getting involved in the entire production process by assisting inventors to establish their own businesses, obtain development grants, design and put together marketing and sales strategies.

My job was to find the entrepreneurs, get them to commit their future product range to IC, then co-ordinate all the people who made these things happen. It was a cross between a talent scout, agent and publisher. First, I had to seek out the talent, then I had to act as a broker between the talent and IC, then lastly I had to co-ordinate the development and marketing activity to ensure the product got to the customer. Initially, I didn't have much help, but as time passed a department developed around me.

I think the problems with Anita started around then. Shortly after we married, her desire to kill world leaders was replaced by a desire to create one. She pushed and pushed me, but I resisted until I got the promotion. After that, my attempts to argue that we could not afford it fell on deaf ears. Unlike the soaps and movies, having a kid was not much fun. Gone were the spontaneous nights of passion and carefree days in bed experimenting how long we could hold off orgasm. Instead, she hung an ovulation diary on the bedroom wall, ticking off the days, and checked her cycle all the time.

As a kid, my mother had once bred cats. There is nothing quite like living in a house with a queen on heat, yowling constantly for a mate as if in constant pain. Although we call ourselves "civilised" as human beings, living with a woman who desperately wants a child is surprisingly similar. Anita seemed to be in constant pain. Tears were regular when she was not ovulating, and particularly each month she found she was not pregnant. But when the temperature rose in the middle of the month, suddenly she switched into lioness mode, waiting to pounce on me as soon as I got home. Whilst I appreciate how she – and I guess other women – think it is the most romantic thing in the world, it was biggest turn off I have ever experienced. I started to dread going home when I had to make love to order, but if I did not the following 26 days were like living with someone suffering from clinical depression.

My life, my sexuality, was not my own. If I was caught jerking off, I got the third-degree for "wasting it". If I tried to seduce her at the "wrong" time, I got the third-degree for not saving it for the big day. When the big day came, however, I was required to do my stuff four times in 36 hours. At no time in my life did I feel less like a human being and more like a sperm bank. It was not that I did not love her or want to have a child. It was that she obsessed about getting pregnant rather

than making love to me. The beautiful seductions stopped. The lingering powerful lust filled hours of sexual tensions were history. Like many guys, I guess, the meaning of life revealed itself to me. From this point forward, I realised I would be last in the pecking order, at the bottom of the food chain.

I started to understand how women feel when they are used like a sex toy and discarded. When I chat to my friends, I realise that I got off lightly. It only took us 7 months for her to get pregnant but some of my friends went through this for years. It sucks the life out of you, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. One friend of mine, Clive, was on the point of suicide when his wife finally got pregnant. After that he was not allowed to touch her for 18 months. I expected to visit him in the local mental hospital, but amazingly he looked okay and still claimed to love his wife! It was then that I twigged he had already gone insane but had found a way to hide it.

And then, of course, there are those magical snippets of conversation that I caught when Anita was on the phone chatting about guys “immaturity” when they cannot have sex. Clive was not immature – I have no idea how he had the maturity to get through all that – but when I tried to talk to Anita about it, she just said he should stop behaving like a child and grow up. Just imagine a kid – no, not a kid, a full grown woman - being given a chocolate shop and told she can eat all she likes whenever she likes, so long as she asks her husband first. Then one day – without warning or discussion – he says she can only have four candy bars a month (to be eaten only when he says, and on two particular days). After four years of chocy-torture, he says the shop has to close for the next 18-months and she cannot have any more – not even from another shop - or she will divorce him. And if she complains, then she should stop whining and “grow up”. Anita would box my ears within a week if I did not bring her chocolate!

Anyway, I was lucky. Anita wanted a kid badly, and our love life continued after she got pregnant. It changed, of course, but at least it was alive and kicking. But the new job at the Innovation Centre eventually took me out on the road and even this disappeared from our life. I had to travel around the universities each week and was away most of the time. When I got home, I was absolutely exhausted and wanted only to sleep, eat and relax. I had no idea how we would cope when the baby was born but I remember thinking that the more money I could make, the better it would be for the future. I was obsessed by that thought. The problem was, it ripped apart our marriage and it never recovered.

With me away each week, Anita started to rely on her sister more. Friends would come and help, not just with the small things like shopping, but the bigger things like decorating, household repairs and gardening. I felt completely dispensable, except for the money I earned. It was miserable trotting around the country, but the work was okay. Each day brought something new

and I met plenty of interesting people. But in the evenings, I would retire to a hotel to read or watch the TV. If really bored, I would watch a sex movie, but not all hotels offered them. It was an awful existence trying to plug the empty gaps each night. I've never really been comfortable socialising with people when I do not have to. After talking all day, forcing more conversation and trying to keep it interesting was the last thing I wanted to do.

Was I ever unfaithful? Not physically, only in the mind. I'm not sure that counts. Sometimes I would meet an attractive woman and she would find her way into my fantasies. But it was inconceivable that anyone could be more exciting in bed than Anita and I had thousands of erotic memories that sustained me in my loneliest moments. It is strange with hindsight that I comforted myself with thoughts that I was lucky. Some guys will never meet anyone like Anita, never experience the rapture and freedom that comes from uninhibited sex, and I used to count my blessings that at least I had a few years with someone like that.

When Briany was born, however, my life changed completely. The best-hidden secret in the world is a father's love for his children. Maybe there are dads who do not care, but I'm not one of them and I cannot remember ever meeting one. There are dads I meet who are angry and bitter about their marriage, but when it comes to the children there is either joy combined with a tireless desire to talk about them, or a silent sadness at the loss of not seeing them. I find kid talk is useful in my work. If a new contact mentions they have children, as soon as I mention mine there is an instant bond. There is never a problem with conversation openers after that.

* * *

"You can put your clothes back on now, Mr Stockton," said Hilary.

Dr Hilary Blane had been my doctor for many years and it was rare to see a frown on her face.

For several weeks, I'd been getting bumps in places that I did not want them – I won't spell it out to you, I'm sure you can guess. I didn't tell Anita because she would only worry.

"What's with the 'Mr Stockton'?" I asked. Hilary usually called me by my first name, so I knew that something must be up.

"Sorry! Sit down, Dave," she said gently.

"Must be serious!" I quipped.

"No, not serious," she said quickly, but without looking me in the eye.

"Hey, doc, you forget what I do for a living – I can tell a tense person from 100 paces. You've got bad news."

Hilary looked up and gave a small smile.

"Dave, you're not unwell, no life threatening conditions, nothing that you won't recover from quickly."

She paused, just long enough for me to realise there was something more.

“So what’s the ‘but’.....?”

She looked up and smiled again, clearly a little embarrassed by what she was about to say.

“How’s your sex life?” she asked.

“My sex life? Is that relevant?”

It was as well that I knew her or I would have walked out of the room.

“The symptoms you have need treatment at a GU clinic, Dave!”

“A what? What’s a GU clinic?”

Hilary was not getting the response that she expected and her head sank for a moment.

“Dave. I think you’ve got a sexually transmitted disease – you need to go to a clinic for further tests and treatment.”

“A what? How’d I get that?”

The moment I asked the question I realised how stupid it must have sounded.

“I was hoping you’d be able to tell me,” she replied.

For the next 30 seconds I looked at her and did not say a word. My mind suddenly passed through a few layers of curiosity, met a concrete floor and with all other possibilities ruled out emotion hit me like the shock wave of a nuclear blast. I felt some chemical race through my whole body and I felt something close to pins and needles as my mind turned to clay. I could not move - not an inch, not a centimetre.

Of all the ways to find out, this seemed the most unlikely. In the movies, you march in through the door at find them “at it”, or a good friend spills the beans, or a private detective uncovers incontrovertible proof by spreading out a series of photos. Perhaps there is a dramatic scene where a tearful wife or sheepish husband confesses all because they cannot bear to lie. To go to the doctor with little bumps in an awkward place and find out that your life has changed forever – that is usually not in the script.

I rarely show my feelings. Sitting there, however, in the doctor’s room I felt a tear roll down my nose.

“Could you wait here a minute?” asked Hilary.

She left the room briefly, then came back to explain that she had asked the receptionist to reallocate the rest of her appointments to the locum doctors.

“Take your time, Dave,” she said. “There’s no hurry.”

I looked up at her and tried to speak.

“How.....how bad?” I asked.

“We’ll need to do further tests, but these symptoms do not in themselves mean you have anything that can’t be treated quickly and successfully.”

“What tests?” I asked clinically.

“A nurse will take you through them. Normally, they will ask you if you would be willing to have a full range of tests, including one for HIV.”

Suddenly it dawned on me how things were going to change.

“I have to tell her, don’t I?”

“Yes, Dave. She’ll need to be tested as well.”

“She’s got a lot of explaining to do. It’s not just the test.”

“Are you sure, Dave?” she asked looking me keenly in the eye.

“Hilary!” I said with a start. “How else?”

“When did you last have a sexual partner other than Anita?”

I racked my brains – it was hard to remember. I was not a complete angel while she was in Kenya, but after she returned home, I had been faithful to her.

“It must be over 6 years, maybe 7.”

“I’m sorry to ask, Dave, but sometimes there’s a long incubation period. It is likely, but not certain, that you got this from Anita.”

“What do you mean? How else?”

“If it turns out that Anita is not the source, then you may upset her for nothing and the tables will be turned.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’ll think that you are the one who’s been....”

She stopped short when I looked at her. I realised how difficult it must be to break this news to patients.

“Oh my God!” I said. “Do I tell her?”

“It is best. If she’s got a partner, they’ll need testing, and their partner if they have one, and so on and so on...”

“Oh my God!” I said again. The ramifications of this were getting bigger with each passing second.

“What are the chances I got this years ago?” I asked.

“Small – but we need to establish exactly what you have. Once you’ve got test results, you’ll be surer. In the meantime, I think you should tell her and stop having unprotected sex.”

“You mean that if I have tests and nothing else shows up, then I’ll know for sure she’s got a lover?”

“Not with absolute certainty, but it would be the most likely reason.”

“How soon can I go to the clinic?”

She opened a drawer and pulled out a leaflet.

“The number and address are on here – if you give them a call, they can usually fit you in quickly, but sometimes it takes six weeks or more.”

My thoughts were flooding all over the place. Should I tell my friends? I certainly did not want to. Should I tell my brother or parents? If I did, they might make my marriage problems even worse. Should I tell anyone at work? I could not see the point, except to explain why I would need time off. All these questions, all these dilemmas – I did not want to think about them but they kept crashing down on me.

“Is there any danger to Briany?” I asked.

“Not from these symptoms,” Hilary answered.

“I don’t know what to do. I can’t take it in.”

“The clinic is good. There’ll be people you can talk to there – it’s not just about treating the symptoms. You can chat to me too, if you like.”

I do not know how to explain to you how this news affected me. Suddenly, everything changed. The life I had ended and the world was full of uncertainty. It is like being hit by a tidal wave without any warning, but instead of the ocean, I was tossed about by waves emotion that swept me away when I least expected. I remember thinking I should take things one day at a time, but then immediately got distressed wondering about the seconds and minutes. How do I live with my thoughts? I had no idea – no idea at all.

I remember Hilary asking if I wanted to go for a cup of coffee, but I just thanked her, stood up, then after a few moments wandered out in a daze. It seemed strange that the worst meeting of my life should end with a polite “thank you” after she gave me such bad news. Nobody can accuse my parents of not bringing me up well. And yet, I was grateful to hear the news from her rather than a locum doctor. The bumps were not something I wished to show anyone, let alone a stranger. I thought she was going to hug me at one point but she decided against it. When I entered the surgery, she was just a doctor but by the time I left, she knew more about one aspect of my life than my parents, my wife, my brother and my daughter. Suddenly she became an important figure.

Just before I left, she assured me I could return any time I liked. Then she said something that really touched me: “you are more thoughtful than any of my other patients”. That she had noticed I was “thoughtful” touched me – it never occurred to me that anyone, particularly my doctor, would notice this. I normally carried around constant feelings of shame, but this moment I caught a strange glimpse of myself. I was not angry, ashamed or afraid. In the weeks and months that followed, I began to learn what an incredible thing the human mind can be.