

Tales of Good and Bad Luck

HIV 101

As has been said before, everyone has bad days, but Geoffrey St Bernard was having a belter.

Over the last few weeks he'd been feeling somewhat under the weather and so last week he'd been to the doctor's for a medical. Several of his friends had been recently diagnosed as diabetic and he was worried that his urine had the merest odour of sugar puffs.

Doctor Doberman had been able to reassure him about the diabetes but had been concerned about his general well being. After a thorough physical, the doctor had taken some blood for testing, but not before doing the "little prick" joke.

This morning he had received a phone call at work. Unfortunately, he had been on the shop floor at the time, but between the receptionist at work and the receptionist at the doctor's they had made an appointment for five o'clock so that he could receive the results of the tests.

When he arrived at the doctor's he found the waiting room empty and he was ushered straight in.

He knew something was amiss when the receptionist brought him a cup of tea. This had never happened, not even when he'd cried when he'd had chicken pox aged thirty two. The doctor, a man who had singularly failed to take his own advice on the dangers of nicotine abuse, looked at him through a cloud of cigarette smoke. He was a big bluff man and believed in taking the bull by the horns.

"I've never had to deal with a case like this before," he started. "There's no easy way to tell you this, you're HIV 101."

"What?"

"You're HIV positive."

This was the 1981 and still the early days of the disease and no-one was quite sure what HIV meant.

"Do you mean AIDS?" asked Geoffrey.

"Well, technically, no."

"But really?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"You have the HIV virus that will develop into full blown AIDS."

"Oh."

The doctor had spent some of the morning looking for the advice sent by the BMA on how to deal with patients with the HIV infection. Unfortunately, he was reaching the end of his career and the letter had been filed with other missives from the BMA, in the bin.

He was an old fashioned God-fearing man and had still had his thinking about homosexuals was as antiquated as his thinking about smoking.

Still, he had prepared a speech and he was going to say it.

“There’s a lot of rubbish talked about AIDS. Let’s start with the basics. First you are unlikely to give it to anyone else. Unless you’re having unprotected sex, sharing needles or a vampire, you’re not likely to pass it on.

“Secondly, it’s not going to stop you doing anything. You can still use public toilets, go swimming and share a bed. Your primary sexual partner has probably already got it and if he – or she – hasn’t, wear rubber. Lots of it.

“Thirdly, it’s not an automatic death sentence. Some people with your type of HIV can live for years, decades even.”

Dr. Doberman sipped his tea.

“And that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you say I was HIV 101?”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s an HIV variant. You’re much less likely to develop full blown AIDS, but when you do, the extra strain on your system means that the slightest infection can lead to complete systemic failure.”

“So you’re saying I could live for years and then I’ll just stop living?”

“Yes. Although you could just drop dead tomorrow.”

“That’s not as reassuring as it might be.”

“No, but look at it this way. Everybody dies sometimes and you might get run over tomorrow. You’re HIV positive, but you could have a long and happy life. Plus, it’s not a case of a long suffering death, it’s going to be short and painless.

“Some people might think you were lucky.”

Then came the business of finding out where he’d caught it from.

This was easy, as he’d only had one sexual partner in the last three years and she was a realistic source of the infection. His friends, Joe and Sylvia Tuffnel had a stormy marriage. Joe was what could be considered something of a ladies man or in Geoffrey’s words, He Put It About A Bit.

This led to Joe and Sylvia frequently splitting up. Whenever this happened, Sylvia moved in with Geoffrey. After about three months Joe and Sylvia would get back together and Sylvia would move out.

It was an odd relationship, but Geoffrey didn’t mind. Somewhere in his head, he always assumed that eventually Sylvia would leave Joe for good and then they’d both live happily ever after.

Well, he thought. Looks like that’s not going to happen.

“She’ll have to be told,” said the doctor.

“As will every slapper within a ten mile radius,” said Geoff with a lopsided smile.

When Geoffrey came out of the doctor’s, he didn’t know what to do.

He decided he needed a drink. He walked into the nearest pub and ordered a drink. A young man came round with a football ticket¹.

“What’s it for pal?” Geoff asked.

¹ A sealed envelope with thirty boxes that punters can initial. The envelope contains the number of the winner.

“Football team.”

“Go on, then. I’ll have a go.”

Instead of putting his own initials in the box thirteen, he decided to write “HIV”.

Suddenly Geoffrey felt uncomfortable. All the people around him were just calling in for a drink on their way home at the normal end to an unexceptional day. He found himself worried that someone he knew might come in and he would have to explain why he was there. He decided to head for home.

Meanwhile, the young man had opened the football ticket.

“And the winner is…” he paused to read the number. “Thirteen… and that’s… HIV. Who’s HIV? HIV anybody? Come on who’s HIV?”

In the far corner of the bar, A large bald man with a moustache sitting with a small flamboyantly dressed young man raised his hand.

“I am, pal,” he said aggressively. “You got a problem with that?”

“Er…no. Here’s your twenty quid.”

The bald man looked surprised.

“Er…thanks,” he said embarrassedly.

“That’s one of the nicest things I’ve ever seen,” said the flamboyantly dressed young man, emotionally. He got up and hugged the ticket seller.

Geoff decided not to say anything. He finished his beer and left.

Geoff set off walking home but then realised that wasn’t what he wanted either.

Suddenly he came across a deserted rec².

After a quick spin on the roundabout, he went and sat on a swing. Gently rocking backwards and forwards he tried to think about what the doctor had told him, but it was all too *big*.

From his position on the swing, he could see that the Park and Arbourthorne Working Man’s Club was already open. While in most areas of the city working men’s clubs are dying off, there are three at the Manor Top. These are the Manor, the Arundel and the Park and Arbour. They survive by staggering the start times of the bingo, so every club gets all the bingo players every night. The players will all have a pint or two, play the four cards and move onto the next club. There are two bingo sessions each night ensuring the clubs are busy, if not full for the half hour that bingo is played. If you’re there at the right time, you can see huge great herds of bingo players travelling between the clubs.

Geoff had always assumed that the clubs opened after seven, just in time for the tombola³, but the Park and Arbour was definitely open. He decided to take advantage of this and get himself a cheap pint.

He strolled in and found the main barn-like concert room surprisingly empty and unusually lit by sunlight. A bored eighteen year old sat picking her teeth with a beer mat. “Whadderyerwan?” she asked without looking up.

Somehow Geoffrey found himself reassured by the casual rudeness and so bought a pint and found a seat and sat down.

² Recreation Ground.

³ Bingo

One pint became two, then three, then four. Geoffrey noticed that the place was starting to fill up and realised he been there for a couple of hours. He started to think he should be going home and making an effort to contact a few people.

Oh sod it, he thought. It can wait.

So he went to buy tickets for the tombola and the various raffles. Because he hadn't plan to do this, he had to buy a dabber as well.⁴

The first game of bingo was the flier⁵. It was £15 for the first line and forty five quid for full house.

Geoffrey wasn't particularly paying attention as he played, but he suddenly realised that the first four numbers were on his card and were on the same line. From past experience he knew that this didn't generally happen. To have four numbers on one lines meant that the numbers drawn must be randomly distributed throughout the entire ninety numbers. It was more likely, in Geoffrey's mind, that the numbers would be grouped together. This is why when the fifth number called made a line he wasn't particularly ready for it. "House," he shouted.

The steward came over and checked his card, and Geoff found himself fifteen pounds richer.

The game continued to a full house and for the next thirty or fifty numbers, Geoff didn't get a chance to use his dabber.

Then it all went mad.

Geoff got the next nine numbers on the trot and suddenly, he was sweating⁶.

Then *bang*. Ten numbers on the trot and Geoff was shouting house for the second time that night.

"Dunt happen very often that," said the steward checking the card.

"What?"

"Who gets the line gets the house. You think it'd happen more often. You know, because they get a good start."

Geoff replenished his pint and sat down jut as they were calling the numbers for Open The Box⁷. There were only three keys left, so the chances of picking the right key were quite high. The amount of money in the box was around nine hundred pounds and there had been something of frenzy when it came to buying tickets. Geoff wished he'd bought more than one ticket.

"BDR 872," called the steward.

Me!

Geoff made his way to the stage and the steward brought the bag of keys. Geoff took the first to come to hand.

He put the key in the lock and was vaguely relieved when it didn't open.

"Let's make sure," said the steward and grasped the key and lock firmly.

The lock sprang open.

Throughout the club there were moans of dismay and torn up tickets flew like confetti.

⁴ A big felt tip for marking bingo cards.

⁵ A single game of bingo for a higher prize.

⁶ Waiting with only one number left.

⁷ The takings from a raffle are placed in a box sealed with a padlock which has a number of keys, only one of which works. The winner of the raffle then picks a key. If the key doesn't fit, it is removed from the pool and the money stays in the box. This means that over the weeks, the amount of money increases and the number of keys will be less.

Geoff took his money and somewhat sheepishly headed back to his seat.

There were still three games of bingo to be played.

I can't possibly win this, he thought.

But he was wrong.

When Geoff had got all fifteen numbers, for a moment he considered not calling "House", but he had only a second to make the decision and found himself shouting out anyway

By now people were starting to notice Geoff's extraordinary run of luck and there were murmurs of discontent from certain areas of the concert room when he was given his payout.

After the steward had paid out, he didn't move away.

"Why are you standing there?"

"I'm hoping some of the luck will rub off."

"Trust me, friend. You don't want my luck."

"Sssssh."

"Don't talk during the tombola. You could be fiddling and nobody cares, but talk in the middle of the tombola and you'll get lynched."

There was a certain inevitability about what happened next.

With the steward and most of the club watching every dib of the dabber, Geoffrey St Bernard dobed his way to his third full house.

"Do you think I'm cheating?"

"I can't see how. And besides, if you were clever enough to come up with a way of beating the bingo, you'd hardly draw attention to it by winning three times on the trot."

"Then why are you still standing there?"

"Is there any point me going anywhere? I'm only going to be coming back."

And it turned out to be true.

After a mere twenty-two numbers Geoff was sweating, in bingo and bodily terms.

When, on the twenty-ninth number he filled his card, Geoff decided not to call.

"You've got to do it, son," said the steward. Geoff knew he was right.

"House," he said weakly.

People threw their dabbers to the table. There were groans and boos accompanied by the occasional cry of "Cheat" and "Fix".

The steward began to shout them down.

"I've watched him for two games now and I can't see him cheating."

"Then your blind!" shouted an octogenarian who'd had to put down her knitting.

"I'm telling you, he's not fiddling, he's lucky."

If I'm so lucky, he thought, *why do I feel so bad?*

"Nobodies that bloody lucky."

"Well, it looks like he is."

"I'll bet he wins the bloody raffle."

Geoff had a quiet word with the steward.

"He says if he wins the raffle he'll give it to charity."

"Which charity?"

There was another muttered conversation.

"Whatever one we're collecting for on the bar."

One of the barmaids picked up the box on the bar.

“Terrence Higgins Trust,” she shouted. “Whatever that is.”

“It’s for AIDS,” said Geoff with a crooked grin.

“It’s for poofs,” shouted another barmaid. “Do it for that one that sends sick kiddies to the seaside,”

Geoff burst out laughing.

“Right,” shouted the steward. “He’s given me his ticket. Barry, make the draw.”

Barry drew the ticket and milked it for all he was worth.

“B”

The room was silent.

“Q”

No-one dared breath.

“L”

Somebody belched and there was an outbreak of nervous laughter.

“Eight.”

Barry had to shout above the laughter.

“Four.”

Silence again and all eyes on the steward with Geoff’s ticket.

“Three.”

The steward shook his head.

“BQL 843,” he said. “Looks like the Terrence Higgins Trust is forty-eight pounds richer.”

The steward smiled and the crowd went wild.

People cheered and whooped, others came up and shook his hand. A number of pints were placed on his table.

“What’s going off?” he asked the steward. “I thought they’d hate me.”

“Hate you? You’re a hero. You’ve won the flier, Open the Box, three cards of bingo and the raffle. And you’ve done it under my beady little eye.”

“But they’ve wasted their money buying tickets.”

“Who cares. It’s the most amazing thing anybody round here has seen. They’ll talk about this for years to come, and most important of all, *they were there!*”

Geoff basked in the glory for a short while, but noticed the club was suddenly emptying.

“Where’s everyone going?” he asked the steward.

“The bingo is starting in the Manor down the road. We stagger them so that we all get the tombola trade. Fancy trying your luck?”

“Better not. I think I’ll get off.”

Geoffrey gave away the extra beers to the committee members and set off home. This took him through the rec for the second time that day.

Brilliant, he thought. *Swings and roundabouts. What you win on the swings...*

He sat on the roundabout and reconsidered the days events.

Swings and roundabouts, he thought. *But it’s not that clear cut. The win on the swings might not really be a win and a loss on the roundabouts might not really be loss. It’s not black and white.*

Okay, so I’m HIV 101 and could drop dead now, but on the other hand, I could fall off this roundabout, break my neck and spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair in agony.

Win five games of chance and I’m a cheat, win six and I’m a hero.

He looked at the bright light of The Manor Working Mans Club across the field and realised that it wasn't time to go home. It wasn't every day you were diagnosed as HIV 101.

Time for another drink, he thought. But whatever happens, I'm not playing bingo again.

He crossed the field and pushed open the door to the club and was asked to show his affiliation⁸. The door man gave this more of an inspection than was usual.

Suddenly, a steward arrived.

"You're not coming in here," he said.

"Why?"

"You've been fiddling the tombola."

"How can you fiddle the tombola? I've had a steward stood at the side of me all night.

Ask him if I've been cheating."

"If you're not diddling then you must be the luckiest man alive."

Something cracked in Geoff and he grabbed the steward by the tie.

"Lucky? *LUCKY*? How can I be lucky? I'm HIV 101."

"Bloody hell. You've won the raffle in here as well."⁹

⁸ A small card that shows you have paid the affiliation fee and can go into any allied club.

⁹ Sorry.

