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# But for the grace of God...

A GP has to stand by powerless as a patient's life disintegrates

**O**NE OF my patients has just been put in jail.

I first met Lionel when he brought one of his five children in with a cold, and tentatively mentioned that he was worried about his wife, Heather. Trouble had started when they had bought a house. The mortgage rate had gone up, payments had become difficult, and Lionel had to work ridiculous hours to keep up with them. His wife, a little immature, couldn't understand why he was never at home, and was taken in by his 'best friend', who used the oldest trick in the book and suggested that Lionel was, in fact, having it away with some bit of stuff and so on.

Heather sought comfort and revenge, and 'best friend' was there to help. Lionel found out, and walked out.

Of course, she soon realised the true situation, and went back to her husband on bended knees — this is all perfectly true, believe it or not.

Lionel, after an initial display of aloofness sufficient to demonstrate his hurt, was pleased to reunite with her and they together decided that the only way to save their marriage was to sell the house and make a fresh start.

So they were now living with Lionel's mother, and sharing her small house with a 16-year-old sister, recently back from care, and her live-in boyfriend, 14-year-old brother and, of course, their own five children.

The immediate problem was a severe attack of guilt in Heather and, understandably, a lack of certainty that both of them would forgive, forget, and behave. A few sessions of gentle refereeing saw them far easier with each other, and the pressures became more domestic.

The sister's relationship was shaky, and her teenage sulks made the household atmosphere simmer, while her agoraphobia kept all the flavour in. Brother had to share a bedroom with Heather's 12-year-old daughter, and there were fears that they were spending a little too much time together.

The younger children were in trouble at school, the two oldest nicked for shoplifting — escaping with a warning — and mother(-in-law) interfered with everybody in a vain attempt to maintain order in a household she had failed to control when the family dynamics had been a lot simpler.

Meanwhile, our young couple persevered against increasing odds to maintain their newly-reformed relationship, and do the best for their children.

They went through the usual fruitless motions of trying to persuade the housing department that they were a little overcrowded, and my own letter received the same lack of response that such pleas usually receive.

In short, the situation was far from ideal, and four months later it was no better, though Lionel seemed to be coping, and fortnightly consultations with Heather allowed her to let off steam. However, the strain was beginning to tell, and talking to Lionel one realised that he was near the end of his tether.

He had had a poor start in life — his earliest memory was ducking to avoid a pan of hot fat his mother threw at his drunken father — and had tried to better himself. He had, overall, kept his marriage together for seven years, had held down a steady job, and had tried to buy his own house. Now he wondered why he had bothered.

And when some local loudmouths threatened to rape his wife in the shop where she worked, he finally snapped. He broke into their flat, threatened them with blue murder and a Colt replica, and eventually calmed down enough to try to make friends and pay for the considerable damage he had wrought. His offer was refused, and the police were called.

Four days later, the housing department offered him a council house and the money from his sale came through.

And so the court decided that he should spend a year or two being morally improved in one of our world-renowned rehabilitation centres, say, Wormwood Scrubs.

And perhaps I'd agree, if I hadn't spent several months watching him try to save what mattered to him in life — his wife, his children, and his self-respect.

I would be more inclined to judge him if I were not so certain that in his situation I would have acted little differently. Even the short period I spent on the dole queue, and on social security — in Brixton, as it happens — gave me more than a little sympathy for those with social problems that we tend to make light of.

So in all honesty I cannot bring myself to cast the first stone. Our judicial system has already done that on my behalf.