

Is It Just Me
Philip Gilliver 2018

Is it just me?

I can remember what she'd said to me as clear as day and it really hurt. 'You drink too much, you're narcissistic, you always wear too much aftershave, you're tight-fisted and what's more...'

I didn't mind any of these things, they were fine. In fact, I sort of took them as a compliment. Narcissistic? Well, she would say that, wouldn't she? I was always too good-looking for her and she knew it. Too much aftershave? You could never wear too much aftershave. Tight- fisted? I was always spending money, new shirts, male grooming products, bar bills, gym membership. No, it was the last part that shook me.

She said 'I wouldn't touch you with the longest barge pole in the whole of the British Isles.' How dare she say that? How dare she put a chink in my ego armour? I used to really like her too; in fact, once or twice I might

have gone as far as to say that she had been the like of my entire life. And there weren't many women I'd said that about. So it took me longer to recover from her brush off than it would have done with others - a record thirty-five point nine seconds. I couldn't see any point in pining any longer. James 'Bond' Fisher did not waste time on lost causes, so many women, so little time and all that.

No, I didn't let the grass grow under my feet. In my view a metrosexual man like me slapped on some moisturiser, a little man makeup, donned his sharpest threads and display the results for all to see like the peacock he was. It could be a costly exercise, but worth it when everything you're buying is for you.

The only problem with going out more was that I kept bumping into Rebecca – and Lee. Lee was my best friend and drinking pal. Or at least he was until he told me he and Rebecca were engaged. I used to like Lee until then. But now I could see he was ugly. Not only that, he was chubby and slightly bald. He came in useful

at times, though: when we stood together at the bar it was even more obvious to all and sundry which one of us was the looker and which one was Quasimodo.

So I had to drink on my own and that wasn't good because it led to me drinking even more.

The trouble was I ended up liking it even more. The fizzy, tingling feeling I got as the world melted around me and the fact that whatever I said and whoever I said it to, there wasn't a single person who wouldn't be hanging on my every single word with utter fascination. They called me the bore, and I was flattered. Obviously they were referring to the drill attachment. Hey, James Fisher the love machine! I would thank them with a knowing wink and strut off feeling like a sex god.

Then I discovered that there was a downside to this party superstar lifestyle. The heavy drinking became a surreal mystery game, the where was James Fisher going to wake up tomorrow morning game? I started waking up in the weirdest places; people's gardens, shop doorways, under bridges and even behind plastic

wheelie-bins. I hated that part. It was so unhygienic and uncool and that wasn't me at all. Only I thought that the nights before made it worth the suffering. That particular morning was completely different.

With the loud music and the shouting and the clinking of glasses still in my head, I awoke on a cold, damp pavement with my head in the gutter. That wasn't the worst part. There were these beer and kebab stains all over my shirt, and I couldn't do a thing about it. In the corner of my eye I could just make out the church spire, which meant that I was lying approximately 1.5 miles away from my wardrobe.

I never could bear the idea of spending another moment looking less than perfect, but there didn't appear to be anybody about and so I thought I could probably get away with it if I used my head. I think I managed to get to my feet with a minimum of wobble. My head was throbbing, as if it had a heavy metal band jamming on it. That twentieth pint of lager I had must have been off.

Apart from that it was remarkably quiet and this wasn't normal. As soon as I'd inhaled a couple of lungs full of fresh air and cleared my head a little I glanced at the time on my mobile phone. It was fast approaching noon. I rubbed my eyes and squinted in all directions and there wasn't a soul about.

Odd, I thought, if it'd been a Sunday I could have half-understood the empty streets but it wasn't. This was 11.55 on a Saturday, so unless I'd somehow managed to sleep through a whole day there should have been some noise and people at least. So I decided to investigate: who wouldn't?

Fastening the top two buttons of my shirt (well, I still had to be presentable) I headed off into the heart of the town. Each time I got to a side street or a turning I stopped and called out. I did this until I reached the shopping arcade and that looked just as dead. On the way I noted a number of badly parked cars at the roadside. All of the doors were open as the drivers and their passengers had got out in a hurry and made a run

for it. I stopped for a moment by an electrical store and viewed the static on the display TVs. What the hell was going on?

I carried on walking around the mall listening to the whispering sound that my fine Gucci shoes made on the ceramic floor tiles as I went. I was thirsty by then. There was a coffee machine on the third floor and it was calling to me. So I jogged up the frozen escalator and up the stairwell to get to it. What a waste of time that was, the damned thing was lifeless. I plugged it in at the wall and although it did eventually spit me out some latté into my cardboard cup it was stone cold. At least I could go into the adjoining multi-storey car park and I would I get a good view of the town from the top level. From there I would be able to see where everybody had gone. My next thought was that I'd been caught in the middle of some national emergency and everyone had to be evacuated. Though if that was the case, then why didn't somebody wake me up and get me to safety? It was all very odd and very worrying. I stayed in the car park for

ages scanning the ground for signs of life and feeling dizzy at times – heights not being my thing.

As my eyes scrutinised the pavements for movement certain things started entering my mind like uninvited guests at a private party. I wondered if I had ever been alone before. Me? The man? Of course I hadn't. Guys like me are never alone. I couldn't believe that I could be the only person left in town.

About three o'clock, just as I was giving my eyes a rest I thought I heard something. It was like an eerie whistling sound as if somebody had given a quick blast through a wooden flute in an echoey corridor, or perhaps an owl. I had to see, but where was it coming from? My head couldn't tell it was too confused to think. And then I saw it. I didn't know what the hell it was; it was there for a second for sure and then it wasn't. What? I couldn't be sure. My mind told me it was about man-size and black, and that it went in the direction of the Square. It's surprising how fast a person can run if he is desperate

for somebody to talk to. I was a blur as I left the car park.

As I was getting closer to the end of the street a weird sensation came over me. I'd stopped thinking about my appearance. What if this other person was a tabloid journalist? I envisaged the headlines.

JAMES FISHER SPOTTED IN DANGER ZONE WITH LAGER STAINS ON SHIRT SHOCK.

I would never have lived it down. People would point at me as I passed. There goes James. He used to be the most beautiful man on the planet, but now he's just a job who sleeps in dustbins.

So before I went any further I thought a little shopping was in order. I dipped into a men's fashion outlet and swapped my shirt with the one the mannequin in the doorway was wearing. So that it wasn't stealing, I put the right money in the till with a note, explaining that I was correcting a serious wardrobe disaster.

I carried on to the Square. For a few minutes there was nobody. I thought about looking for somewhere to sit

and wait. I don't know what it was, a voice in my head, a hunch or what but something told me to stay put and to turn around. I did this very slowly. What I saw gave me a start. About twenty or thirty feet away from me was a man in black robes. At least I'd assumed it was a man, it looked like a man. He was quite tall and slim. He was standing outside the newsagents' waving at me, as if he wanted to tell me something.

'Me?' I yelled in his direction. 'You want me? What do you want?'

I expected him to shout something back, but he didn't. He just carried on giving me the same hand gesture which was a sort of ghostly 'come hither' thing.

'Not until you tell me what you want,' I called back at him. 'Are you with the police?'

Now that was stupid. Quite obviously he wasn't a copper. He wasn't exactly dressed like one, unless he was from the undercover evil wizard division. I moved closer to him, just another foot or so. I wasn't altogether

sure I wanted to trust somebody who dressed like that in broad daylight.

‘Just tell me what’s going on,’ I said. ‘Where is everybody?’

I don’t know what kind of a response I expected to get from such a mysterious being, but he wasn’t keen to say anything. Perhaps it was intentional; maybe he was to freak me out a little. What he did do was to slowly shake his head. I couldn’t see his face, as the hood of his cape obscured it. He was like some black monk of doom.

‘What happened then?’ I said. ‘All I know is, that I went out last night, possibly had a little too much to drink and when I woke up there was this, no-one. Is this something to do with you?’

There wasn’t even a gesture this time. He raised his head and I caught a little of his face, his pointed white chin.

‘What are you?’ I asked him, it. I have to confess I was a little scared, although I think I hid it well.

Then he looked at me, straight in the eye. I couldn't see anything much, a tunnel of darkness, but somehow I knew he was staring straight at me. It was suddenly very cold. There I was standing in the middle of the street with the rays of the sun beating down on a July afternoon, yet I was shivering inside. How stupid was that? That was it, my mind was made up. From that moment on this thing, whatever it was, wasn't a person but a thing.

And it was now moving slowly towards me.

'Stop there! I cried. 'Stop there right now or I'm running away' (as if I could.) I have to confess here that the second part of that sentence wasn't supposed to come out. Not that it mattered, the thing ignored me anyway. Another stupid move, I closed my eyes. A natural reaction when you are afraid. I hoped that it would have gone by the time I opened them again. I felt a blast of cold air from the movement of his cape against my cheek, so I knew it was close. Then to my surprise, he didn't kill me. He pulled my hand

open and put something in it. Furtively, I tilted my head downwards and had a peak. It was a newspaper.

Now why, I thought would he want to give me a newspaper? Did he want me to finish the crossword? Did it want me to give my thoughts on what was going on in the Middle East? I couldn't anyway. It was the Daily Telegraph and I never could understand all the long words in it. I raised my head to tell him this and that was a massive mistake because as soon as it caught me looking it threw the hood back so that I could get a proper view of it.

And I ran away. I had never done that in my life until then. I've strutted in my time, I've cruised and I've even swaggered along, but never had I run from anything. It was not a cool thing to do. My thinking is, that if girls ever saw you doing it, they would never fancy you.

It was the face, which made me run, that bony, white face like a skull. Not that you could call it a face. It had eye sockets, no eyes, though, nothing, that might have at one time been a nose, a sort of mouth, or rather a jagged

crescent hole like a Halloween pumpkin. I ran until I was around the corner and stopped to catch my breath. As I have already said, running wasn't something I did. I rested my back against the wall of the bookies and when I felt better I checked to see if the creepy thing was following me. It was gone.

So why was I given a newspaper? That was a curious thing for deathly spectre to give a man. I had to see why, and the words on the front page hit my chest like a sledgehammer.

MYSTERIOUS SUPERBUG WILL ANNIHILATE
THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF EARTH.

This was too much for my mind. I slid down the wall and my bottom hit the pavement. No, I couldn't believe it, everybody gone? That was a disturbing thought.

The best thing to do, would be to try to phone somebody, but who? I checked through the directory on my phone and it was empty. Of course it was. I was a lone wolf, a predatory peacock, a ship that passed in the night. I didn't have any friends to call. Lee wasn't even

listed, every time I'd asked him for his number he said he'd give it to me later. I had an idea. I dialled a number at random, any number, the first eleven digits that came into my head,

I let it ring much longer than I usually did and to my relief there was a voice.

'Thank god!' I said, 'then it isn't true, there is somebody else.' I was so relieved to hear another human voice.

Then I caught what she was actually saying,

'... But I assure you your call is very important to us. If you would like to stay on the line one of our trained customer advisers will be happy to assist you with your query...'

But there was no giving up for James Fisher. I actually tried a few numbers before I gave up, third time lucky et cetera, and then fourth time and fifth time. For my efforts, all I got was endless annoying ringing noises.

That's it then, I thought. I really was alone. Suddenly I didn't feel so cool or so attractive. The previous night I'd been James the man. No matter where I went in,

town someone would say, there's James and he's looking good.

Not now, there wasn't another soul left to talk to, to chat to, to chat up, to laugh with, to drink with and worst of all, nobody to tell me how great I was, or how much they wanted to be like me.

I felt so depressed. I carried on walking, without a thought about which direction I was going in. Where was I going? Just moving, just putting one foot in front of another until I ran out of ground to put my feet on. As I considered my situation, I thought about the things that were in my head earlier at the car park. Yes of course I'd been alone, many times in fact and never knew it. When you thought about it, it was entirely possible to be in a crowded room and still be all alone. Had I been kidding myself all this time? I'd been to hundreds of drinking places in my time and always thought the reason nobody wanted to talk to me was because I looked too special, that they were weighing me up to see

if I would find their company insulting. This was food for thought if nothing else.

I ended up by a bridge and stopped to look at the muddy-brown river rushing beneath me. How inviting it looked, how cold and deep. I thought it wouldn't really matter now if I threw myself in and disappeared like all of the others on the planet and the human race would be no more. Would the last one out of the building, turn off the lights! Goodnight and thank you!

So I climbed onto the ledge and closed my eyes again. Now there was a thought, do I keep them closed when I jump in or do I keep them open? I hadn't committed suicide before and didn't know what the proper protocol was.

What I did know was that, if you were going to do it, then you should do it quickly, without thinking about it too much. I could have been standing there all night and still not decided. I started counting, backwards like they used to do at Cape Kennedy. Only where should I start? Ten was too soon. No, a hundred? Too far away.

Twenty would be a perfect number, just as long as I counted slowly.

I must have counted down from twenty, ten times before I realised it was a hopeless cause. My legs hadn't stopped wobbling and it was putting me off. I kept losing my place and needed to start again. Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all. It would have taken me ages to die anyway. I was a strong swimmer so drowning would've been extremely difficult.

I also had a vision of all the old footage of corpses in police that had been dragged from lakes and beaches. Apparently your body soaks up the water, and you balloon to unrecognisable proportions. No way was I going to put on a few pounds even if I wasn't going to be alive to feel bad about it. What if somebody found me? What if it was someone who knew me? I couldn't take that risk.

Then – hang on a pigging minute!

Of course, none of this was going to be a problem. I didn't have to die, because it was all complete and utter garbage.

God, I was thick! Why didn't I see it before? What I'd been holding in my hand all along was a newspaper, that very mornings edition to be precise. So if everybody else in the world was dead who printed it?

What was going on? I knew damned well what was going on, it was Lee. Sometimes we would play tricks on our colleagues at the office. Grand things like printing off fake lottery tickets and tell people they'd won or posting them out letters from the clap clinic. Once we even put together a TV news bulletin and fed it into someone's TV telling him there was a cholera epidemic and he would have to stay indoors and not eat or drink anything for three days, and it was his birthday. We never saw a grown man cry so much. I believed that things like that made you incredibly popular with folk, as they know in an instant you were such a fun person to spend time with.

Yes, this was Lee's doing, although how he'd managed to empty the town was anybody's guess. I stormed back towards the town to have it out with him. I didn't have to look very far. He'd been following me all along, watching me get stressed out no doubt, waiting to catch a glimpse at the horror on my face so he could laugh about it. I guessed Rebecca wouldn't have been too far behind him. When I caught up with him, he was standing by the fountain outside the town hall, waiting for me to say something, to say that he'd got me and that my reputation was now ruined. Thanks.

'The game's up mate,' I said, pushing him on the shoulder. 'I knew what you were up to from the start so I win, you can take that stupid mask off.'

But it wasn't Lee. I'd been right the first time. I was close enough to tell and it definitely wasn't him. There was nothing human about him at all. If I had to compare him to anything I would have to say that up close he was like a robot or an animatronic figure like the ones in Disney World. It was watching the way his head floated

around on his neck that made me think that. Like there should be some sort of whirring sound to go along with it.

And so I did something even more stupid. I was so convinced that my deductions were right this time that I tried to pull off his cloak with several determined and awkward jerks. Another mistake, a bony hand gripped my throat, another disappeared inside its garb and went it came out again it was holding a scythe.

This time, to my horror it spoke. ‘Now you must die,’ it said with a croaky whispery voice. I whimpered like a frightened child, ‘W-why?’

‘Because I am Death and I have come for you, James Fisher, the last of the human race.’

‘I’ll run away again,’ I croaked in its grip. ‘You won’t catch me next time!’

‘Yes, I will,’ said Death. ‘You cannot escape me. This has been a busy time for me, but now it is over.’ Then he told me that we were going to count together and not

to fear anything because it would be all over soon, and we did.

‘Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...

I really didn’t want to die. I pleaded with him like a feeble old woman, and was quite ashamed to say my eyes were welling up with tears. To someone like me that was the equivalent of wetting yourself.

‘Five... four... three... two... awake!’

Awake, what did he mean awake? I was sure whatever death was, it must have been something completely opposite to that. My eyes were still closed, I was still afraid to open them. I detected changes in my environment. It wasn’t cold any more it was quite warm. My forehead was soaked in sweat and so was my chest and there was the strong smell of stale beer. And then to my amazement a roomful of people started clapping.

No, it wasn’t the end of the world at all, or a mad dream, but me standing on a wooden stage in a working men’s club like an idiot. It was Lee’s stag do.

I remembered then that he'd dared me to volunteer myself for the hypnotist.

And on that night I surprised myself. Usually I would have had a go at Lee for doing this, for making me lose my cool in front of so many people, but I didn't. What I actually did was to walk calmly off the stage and into the audience. Lee was sitting in the front row and when I approached him, he looked concerned for a moment. I held out my hand and he took it gladly.

'I really deserved that, didn't I?' I said confidently.