



## Introduction to *It's Not Me, It's You*

Jon Richardson

My name is Jon Richardson. I am an extreme perfectionist and I live on my own in the Wiltshire town of Swindon. I make my living as a stand-up comedian, travelling the country and talking about my life with what I intend to be hilarious consequences. In February 2010 I was asked by the Guardian newspaper's Weekend supplement to write an article on romance for their Valentine's Day special. I wrote the only article I felt able to write, namely my thoughts on the other side of the dating coin from the point of view of someone who is not in a relationship, has not been in one for some time, and feels more than a little trepidation at the thought of ever being in another one. Here is what I wrote and what was printed on 13 February.

### NOT LOOKING FOR MISS IMMACULATE PERFECTION WITH A GSOH ...

My last girlfriend was a loser. Literally. A wonderful and beautiful person, but prone to losing things: keys, money, credit cards, mobile phones. Each time she lost something, she would get upset and come to me for help and reassurance.

I, on the other hand, am a keeper. Not in the American sense that women throw themselves at me. Rather that if you were to ask me to lay my hands on a receipt for a pair of shoes I bought in 1997, I would be angry if it took me more than 90 seconds to locate it. Over to the filing cabinet I would stroll, R for Receipts, S for Shoes, and work through chronologically.

Had our relationship taken place in a sitcom, this juxtaposition would have led to hilarious consequences, as we laughed and joked about what a couple of cards we were and what kind of mixed-up world could ever have brought us together. Instead, we argued frequently over what she saw as something she was powerless to change, and I saw as a correctable weakness in her character.

In general I would say I find it difficult to accept other people's shortcomings. I am not an unfair person but I do think

more effort is the solution to most problems. Not losing things is simply a matter of trying harder to remember where you put them, isn't it? Popular music is no help here:

If you love something,  
Let it go, If it comes back it's yours,  
That's how you kno-o-ow

Nonsense, Christina Aguilera! I say, 'If you love it, file it away under "Things I love". If it's required at a later date, you'll know exactly where it i-i-i-is.'

Wanting things my own way is not something I like about myself. From my love of right angles to my stubborn, black and white views on complex issues, I recognise I can be a very difficult person to be around. I also cannot fail to recognise many symptoms of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. I have countless habits that I know serve no purpose but am powerless to avoid. I arrange my coins into ascending size in my pockets, for example, and nothing gives me more comfort than the knowledge that my forks, knives and spoons are all in the correct place, tessellating magnificently in their drawer.

I like to think that we're all on a scale where these tendencies are concerned. I am sure many people find it difficult to settle down to watch a DVD with a cobweb hanging behind the TV. But what if the cobweb isn't behind the TV – or even in the same room – but lurking nauseatingly in the room next door? Could you still relax and enjoy the film? As a child I remember marvelling at how neatly my dad's sponge used to fit into the sponge-nook in his Ford Escort, but I don't know whether this was an early warning of who I would become or the reason for it.

If I were to have a catchphrase (and I like to think I don't), it would be, 'Fun must be sacrificed for efficiency.' It's harder to try all the time, it's harder to be monogamous than to sleep with whoever you want and it's harder to be disappointed by failure than it is to laugh and move on. That said, I have definitely crossed a line.

I no longer attempt new things because I am too afraid of failing. In my garage there exists a shrine to the person I promised I would become: scores of broken musical instruments, squash rackets and computers carefully boxed up to prevent them from hurting me any longer. I enjoy meals out, but limit my menu choices to things I've eaten before to reduce the risk of wasting money on a meal I don't enjoy.

For me there is no pleasure to be had in an experience unless I complete it perfectly first time. I'm not just talking about golf here, or bowling, but simply eating a biscuit, which can be done the right way or the wrong way in my world (depending obviously on the biscuit in question). But there is another part of me that wonders why, if my way is so right, it has brought me to live alone, far from family and friends, in Swindon.

Swindon, which is somewhere between Bristol and London, is a town that is synonymous with comedy, not that anything famously funny has happened here, but people seem to laugh when you say that you live in Swindon. Like Slough, it simply inspires the pity that is such a constituent part of British humour. 'His life is clearly shit, this is going to be brilliant!'

I moved here when I dropped out of university, stepped off the treadmill and took control of my future. I wanted somewhere I could be anonymous, where there was nothing to distract me from what I wanted to achieve. Unless I developed a sudden fascination with roundabouts, Swindon seemed the perfect place to reinvent myself. At no point in my teens did I think, 'I can only hope that by my late twenties I will have my own place, close to a big Asda and with equally handy transport links to Cirencester or Wootton Bassett.' Yet here I am.

I should point out here that there are many positives to be had from taking life as seriously as I do. For example, I don't remember the last time I fell over. Even in the recent snow and ice I stayed upright, although less by stealthy catlike grace than by steadfastly refusing to leave my house. I would rather stay at home than take a tumble on my way to Morrisons and be laughed at by passers-by. Falling is a good example of something that can be seen in one of two ways: either it is an unavoidable consequence of our get-up-and-go lifestyles, or it is an inability to perform such a rudimentary task that it cannot be tolerated. Needless to say, I subscribe to the latter ideology.

When it comes to the simple pleasures in life, half an hour with a glass of beer and an episode of *You've Been Framed!* is hard to beat. Occasionally I have to rewind and watch the same clip over and over again (I'm talking about you, girl falling into boating lake). I laugh uncontrollably but it's not the suffering of another human being I enjoy, it's the relief. 'It could have been me!' I think, as I watch pensioners grappling unsuccessfully with pogo sticks and dogs running into glass doors. I treat each show as a training manual for life, crossing off pastimes that represent an unnecessary risk: flying remote-controlled aircraft in misty fields, spinning round in the garden with an upturned rake on my chin, carrying a carefully iced birthday cake. Falls end in pain and humiliation; falling over, falling from grace. Even, in my experience, falling in love.

My last relationship ended in 2003 (it seems the final thing my girlfriend lost was her desire to put up with my constant nitpicking) and I decided to take a break for a while. There is no reason, I thought, why people can't be completely happy on their own. Initially I revelled in returning home to find that everything was exactly where I had left it; that there was as much milk as there had been when I last used some and that I could watch whatever I wanted on TV. The novelty has now definitely worn off and the grass on the other side of the fence is a sickly, HD green.

I haven't woken up with a cup of tea by the bed for seven years. It seems such a small thing (and those of you reading this who are in relationships will probably be thinking that at least when you make a cup of tea yourself it doesn't taste like crap) but it's one of a thousand things I miss about having someone around to take care of you. I have spent my entire adult life getting things the way I want them and all I want now is someone to give it all up for.

When you look into the eyes of the person you love, it is easy to forget that there is anything else in the world besides the river of emotion flowing between you. Why, then, do you want to push them out of the window five minutes later for putting a wet teaspoon into the sugar? Have they not been told

a thousand times that the sight of the brown clusters this forms makes you feel sick? Of course they have ... so they must be doing it because they hate you! You hate them, too. How could you have been so blind earlier? Then, as you are getting up to charge headlong in their direction, they laugh – and you remember why you love them – and the whole exhausting cycle begins anew.

But if true love is hard, then one-night stands hold little appeal for a perfectionist like myself. In my head I have a carefully ranked list, with things I do well at the top, and things I do badly at the bottom. About two-thirds of the way down, between making trifle and rewiring a plug, is 'showing a woman the night of her life between the sheets'. I would no sooner go clubbing and pick up a woman for sex than I would run on to the pitch at Old Trafford and start showing off my keepyuppy skills.

My friends can't believe how long I have gone without having sex. I see it rather like going to the cinema: of course it's fun and if we all had our own way we would do it as often as possible, but if we don't get round to going, it's probably just because there were far more important things to do.

In the last few years I have met women who have made me think that it might be time to end my self-imposed isolation. From those whom I have been out with a few times, to strangers who have walked past me on a train, a brief encounter will set my mind racing about what the future could be like for us and remind me of all the things I currently miss out on. Believe me, holidays abroad, lazy Sundays and trips to Monkey Forest are all much less fun alone.

Things never get far before I find some reason to knock down the idealised vision I have created. If they are attractive, I wonder whether I am being superficial. If they are funny, I wonder whether they are funnier than me. Perhaps they will call or text too frequently and I will feel harassed, or they won't text or call at all and I will become convinced they despise me. It could be something as small as a 'Hope your OK' text, which will send me spiralling into apocalyptic visions of a life without apostrophes or question marks.

On the other hand, do I want someone like myself? An equally quarrelsome perfectionist, only with breasts and less body hair? Absolutely not, it would drive me insane. According to the American author and philosopher Sam Keen, 'We come to love not by finding the perfect person, but by seeing an imperfect person perfectly.'

Great, you would think, I can finally stop looking for Mr or Miss Right and just work on convincing myself that Mr or Miss Not Bad But Smells Funny And Has An Oddly Small Mouth is actually perfect.

This is far more difficult than it sounds.

In the early stages of a relationship, what I call 'the lying stage', two people will display only that side of their character that is attractive to a prospective partner. 'You love Dostoevsky, too? Wow! Well, aren't we just two peas in a long-winded, Russian pod?'

A bond will subsequently form based upon the fictitious life that these two invented personalities could share. Friends and family will be informed that the search for 'the one' is off.

We can all get to this point easily enough, but the real challenge comes as the stresses of compromise become too much and the real person begins to manifest itself.

He wants to wash up as they cook, before residue has a chance to dry out and stick, whereas she wants to leave it to soak and do it after *The Simpsons*. She wants to go on holiday to a place where they can do and see things of interest; he wants to go somewhere he can drink by a pool. She wants to paint the bedroom red and he wants to get SkyPlus. She wants to have a baby and he still wants to get SkyPlus.

In comedy cliché terms, this is known as the point when two people finally feel comfortable enough to break wind in one another's company. Curiously, this is seen as a good thing. For me, it signals the beginning of the end. From the peak of potential perfection you descend down through 'going to the toilet with the door open', past 'perfunctory sex' and into 'cold, dead stares across the breakfast table'. I could quite happily get through a 40-year marriage without ever suspecting that my partner went to the toilet at all.

As I read this back to myself (the last line especially), my conclusion is, 'Wow. That guy really needs a girlfriend!' Surely no relationship could be as difficult as living with my own perfectionism? If I met the woman of my dreams, would I mind her organising our CDs by genre and not alphabetically? Could I let her keep the knives to the left of the forks in our shared cutlery drawer? Of course, I'm not a fool. But that's not what is really being surrendered in a relationship. What you give to someone, when you give him or her your heart, is control over your happiness. Their moods and reactions can dictate absolutely whether you skip out of bed in the morning or are afraid to go home after work. There is no middle ground; the joy is in the surrender.

I know that no one is happy all the time, but I have learned that unhappiness can be an awful lot easier to deal with if you know you are responsible for it, and therefore responsible for changing it. It's in my nature to focus on the negative details so that they can be fixed. The problem is that I sometimes forget to enjoy life in the meantime and just go looking for the next thing to improve upon. As much as I want that cup of tea in the morning, and all that goes with it (security and a sense of contentment, not just sugar and some toast), I am scared that my desire to make someone perfectly happy would be an impossible pursuit and the cause of much unhappiness.

I can't shake off my feeling that the only inevitable result of a long-term relationship is that you will see somebody else's weaknesses and they will see yours. Eventually you will lose respect for one another and either break up or find yourselves locked into a loveless future. Am I right? Of course not! Can I change? I sincerely hope so because, as it stands, it is clearly me who is the loser, desperately looking for a keeper.

Taken from *It's Not Me, It's You* by Jon Richardson.