

Introduction

‘What would you like to talk about today, Victoria?’

Alison looks at me in a way that doesn’t give out much (or anything, really) and about a quarter of a smile. Or, OK, perhaps half a smile. I cannot read her face, which vaguely unsettles me, as I don’t know what to expect. I am pretty good at seeing through people, but not her.

Obviously; this is why she is a shrink!

It is only our third session, so I haven’t quite sussed out what is going on here.

I shuffle, nervously, in my seat. I don’t like being put in the spotlight. Or asked for my opinion, if I can help it. I’d prefer to keep a low profile, thanks very much. Please don’t ask me to put myself forward.

I wonder how to respond to her question. If I roll my eyes at her, that would, surely, be rude, right?

I know better than that, so I suppress the urgent need to roll my eyes to the very back of my head and sigh in exasperation.

Count to ten. One... Two...

I look around, hoping she may forget having asked me a question. The therapy room seriously looks as if taken out of a Hollywood movie with the mandatory leather couch... just it isn’t a couch but an armchair.

A pretty comfortable one, I must admit. Which is, of course, the whole idea: to put you at ease and make you talk.

Now, that is not something I do: talk to strangers about myself. No matter how comfortable the seat, I would prefer not to have been here in the first place.

Anyway, bar the couch, and my height (I'd bet she's never had a patient of my height before, at least not a female), everything else fits the bill. The walls are covered in boring, upper class, neutral pattern paper: one you wouldn't even notice – unless you are fishing for a welcome distraction like I am. There isn't too much furniture, either, or anything to catch your eye, like ornaments or pictures. I wonder if this may be for the same reason: to keep you focused on what you are here to do – engage in a meaningful conversation.

At least it doesn't feel clinical; that I must give her. Last time I had counselling, it was in more of a medical environment. That felt different to the warmth of Alison's private house. I am not sure how I feel about this. I feel as if I am an intruder in someone else's life. It is all different and makes me nervous: I don't like changes. Or surprises. My previous counsellor always led the conversation and asked me questions. I happily followed.

Yes, I am a good follower. This is how I was brought up: doing my absolute best not to stand out.

This therapy is different. Alison is not giving me any leads. She is the one who follows, and I am not sure I like that. Most certainly, I don't appreciate being asked to come up with topics for conversations. After all, it wasn't my idea to come here. And this seems to be too hard a work!

Eight... Nine... Breathe.

'I don't know!' I'd like to snap at her, 'You are the therapist, you tell me what to talk about! All I want is to get on with my life, lose the headaches and just be happy! What *I* want to talk about is stuff you won't wanna know! I feel bloated and tired, I have a million things jotted in my diary that I haven't managed to cross off for weeks... I just don't have no time for *this*! I have a deadline on Wednesday and last thing I can afford is sitting here, 'talking'!!'

Or maybe let me have a nap on your sofa instead of talking; that would do perfectly!

Now, wouldn't that be lovely. Thinking about it, I will probably need a snooze in the car after work: I can hardly go through a full day of work and commute without having a short sleep before I drive off home. That can't be good...

I move my gaze from the pretty horrendous wallpaper: staring at it is not going to help me. The woman is still expecting my answer.

‘I don’t really know, Alison’, I smile politely. ‘Perhaps we should start where we left it last time? We talked about work’.

This doesn’t seem to be going the way I was hoping. Although, in all fairness, I had no particular expectations. It wasn’t my idea to have counselling to start with. It was my boss who suggested it during my yearly appraisal: apparently, I seemed stressed. Me, stressed? I didn’t laugh at him at the time, which took some effort (I know better than that, he is my manager and all), but, seriously, I take pride in being a tough cookie. Stressful or not, whatever life brings on, I just get on with it!

As long as I don’t run out of headache tablets, as this is when I do get stressed. Without them, I’d fall apart.

Thinking about it, my annual medication review is coming up... Damn, this is a bother! Through some curse, or just sod’s law, each year it is a different GP who picks the short straw to do this, so I have to explain it all over again. My headaches have had pretty much every single doctor in our surgery scratching their heads. Yes, I have heard about overdosing and rebound headaches. This doctor will, again, need to know just why I need tablets so regularly, and why on earth I have two similar drugs on repeat prescription. Oh for crying out loud, just sign off

the script and have trust in me. I know what I am doing. I am not a junkie, but I do need the bloody things.

It's not like I haven't tried natural ways of getting rid of headaches, either. I've had acupuncture, homeopathy, hypnotherapy, flower therapy, reflexology – you name it. Don't want to even think how much it must have cost me over the years. And – nothing. So, give me those pills! Please.

Knowing I may not have enough tablets for the month seriously freaks me out. Just worrying about that can give me headaches! I can survive a lot. And I have. Not having my regular stash of migraine pills, though, is my biggest worry. At times (admittedly, quite rare ones), I have gone without prescription tablets for a week (or even two!), but I need the peace of mind that there is a pill in my purse should I need it.

Knowing that I have my regular dosage on me, I can conquer the world. I am a superwoman.

Anyway, I am still not sure why, but Tom (my boss) suggested it might be a good idea for me to get some counselling, and the company would pay for it. I tried not to look offended, but, seriously, how dare he! Does he mean I need help?! How rude, I am not a nutcase, I beg your pardon! And I am doing quite well, in my own humble opinion.

Not that I was a nutcase when I had my first string of counselling sessions, of course. But desperate times call for desperate measures, right, and my marriage was by that point shambles, so I needed a bit of help. I, eventually, did come through to the other end, though, and am absolutely fine. I really am!

Still, this is probably kind of a rare opportunity. Not many companies would fund therapy, during office hours as well. On the other hand, it is not like I, myself, have the money (or time, for that matter!) to shell out on expensive and, quite possibly, pointless, talking sessions, so I may as well accept the goodwill gesture. Which is why I agreed to do it. Why not – if I am getting paid for my time. Can't do much harm.

So here I am, scratching my head and wondering what the hell to talk about with Alison this time around.

‘Perhaps today we can talk about you? Why do you think you get your headaches? What goes on in your life outside of work? Would you like to tell me about it?’

Would I... How long have you got?! I can talk about my life alright, it might be an amusing monologue. What is the point in that, though? Something my son said the other week pops up randomly in my head. He complained that his counselling sessions with the adolescent mental health professional were a waste of time, as all they did was chit chat. I

dismissed his comment: surely, therapists know what they are doing, it is none of your business to judge! They do steer the conversations to meet the goal of each session, and he wouldn't know the 'small talk' is actively carefully led by the professional.

So why, exactly, is *this* specialist, who obviously knows what she is doing, right, asking *me* to lead the way?

Oh well. I am here anyway, the company is paying; they want to help me achieve a better work - family balance, so I may as well make the most of the bloody thing somehow.

All very well said, though, but what *do* I talk about? My life, this long and uninteresting string of trials, errors and failures? You know Bridget Jones and her diary, right? Well, *that* was fiction. My life, on the other hand, is real, and is not a pretty picture.

And, where do I start?

The Tallest Girl in the World

Don't get me wrong, I love my parents. But it is all their fault! Sorry, mum! I know I should either speak good things or nothing of people who have passed away... But, still, you two knew you were taller than the average people (quite a bit taller, actually, considering the size of people from your generation!), so shouldn't have mated in the first place. You would have expected your children to outgrow you, and judging by your own height-related struggles, surely wouldn't have wanted to cause the same to your children!

Tall people must not be allowed to reproduce.

I know people will hate me for this statement. Yes, it is extreme, but I have some pretty good reasons for it: my whole life story. Plus, it is a free country and I can say what I think, can't I. To an extent...

If I were a lawyer, I'd have proposed a bill preventing tall men from marrying tall women. Not that my suggestion would be legally justified (discrimination and all), but still worth a shot. This is the only way to try and reduce the damage a bit. Although, scientifically speaking, it might not, as my ex-husband's parents are both short, and he still turned out tall – but at least it wasn't their fault! That was some odd genetic mystery.

My parents, on the other hand, are 180 cm and 192 cm, so should have known better!

Producing tall children spreads the misery they have been living with, and this simply isn't fair. Not when you are a girl, anyway.

My mum didn't talk much about feelings, so didn't share many of her height worries with me. She did, however, mention a few times over the course of the years that she was the tallest girl in her school. All her life she tried to stand tall and proud, although what she really felt like was a giantess. Apparently.

Ha! She was only 180 cm! That is not much!! I wouldn't mind being her height... as opposed to my freakish two metres.

I don't remember much from my early years, but there is a conversation stuck in my memory, and it clearly proves my point: they knew what they were doing...

I must have been very young when my parents sat me down and had this weird talk with me. That I would be a tall girl and it was likely that people might not treat me nicely. The word 'bully' didn't exist in communist Bulgaria, but looking back at my past, this is what they must have meant. Back in the days, my very young brain was wondering, what were they on about?

Little did I know.

Alison is waiting for me to start our conversation. Rather patiently, I must acknowledge, although I see a bit of a surprise in her eyes: surely, she would like to dig deeper and find out where this sudden rage came from. She does seem fairly non-judgmental, which puts me at ease a bit, once I realise I'd come across quite angry. Oops.

I wonder what to say. After all, I know my parents didn't mean to do *this* to me. All they wanted was to have a happy family... the same way I did. And now that my son is starting to outgrow me, I bitterly realise I have done just the same thing that screwed up my own life: created giants. Freaks of nature.

I, too, should have known better.

At least my kids belong to another generation, one of giant boys and not so giant girls. While me... I was the tallest girl in a half-a-million city, with my staggering two-metre height. For all I know, I may well have been the tallest woman in the whole country, or in the world, even. At least it bloody felt like it! I, for one, have never met a female of my height – like, ever. I know they do exist, theoretically, but haven't seen those unicorns as yet.

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Being a tall girl in the eighties was no fun. I don't think it is much different nowadays, either. Not to me, anyway. I do have a few girlfriends around 180 cm or just over (nowhere as tall as me, obviously, but, technically, they are classed as 'tall'): none of them has ever been particularly happy with their height. Exactly my point.

'Oh, I wish I had your height!!' some shorty will randomly exclaim every so often. Not me, thanks. I'd rather be a bit more normal. Would have probably changed my life a bit...

Back in those days, the majority of the population in my home country was below 180 cm. Anyone over that would have been regarded as pretty much a giant and, as such, attracted all sort of negative attention. It didn't help, either, that I lived in one of those countries where people didn't necessarily keep their mouths shut or mind their own business. Oh no, they just feel compelled there to express their own opinions, even if no one asked them to.

It is still like that now, a bit worse even, with freedom of speech and all privileges associated with it. During good old communism there were at least some norms of social behaviour, so humiliation was a bit more subtle... while nowadays all it takes is to switch the TV on and watch a few minutes of their reality shows. Homophobic, different-to-us phobic,

anything-to-make-fun-of phobic. They'd have a field day with me, if I were to be a guest of one of those shows.

I would have hated to be a teenager there now. Which is what my children would have been if I'd stayed there. Good job I got to escape to a country with a bit more tolerance towards others. In theory, at least.

Anyway. Because of my height, there was always an expectation that I'd be the most responsible and mature amongst a group of peers. Strangers assumed I was older than my actual age, too, which wasn't much fun. Same thing happens with my son now, and the worst thing is that I catch myself having higher expectations for him. I should, really, know better!

Story of my life. Which, by the look of it, Alison finds rather interesting. Really? I wonder if that is due to her professional inclination, or just personal interest. She must have all sorts of freaks sitting in this chair, and I am sure I am just one of those.

I scroll through my unread Instagram messages to show to her what unhealthy interest men seem to have in me, for one reason only: my size. Here's the latest one that makes me want to bang my head against the wall: 'Hello hands to cm??' Learn punctuation, moron! Apparently, this user has also been trying to start video chats with me... four times. For

fuck's sake. Get a life. At least his previous message was grammatically correct, though: 'How big are your hands??'

What the hell is wrong with these people? I know different things float everyone's boat, but, seriously! A few years ago I got this request from someone with an Indian name who seemed to be in the modelling industry. He offered me some serious money for taking pictures of my feet with a ruler next to them as evidence of their size. I freaked out at the idea to start with, then decided to go for it. Why not, after all no one would see my face, and it wasn't like I was going to show my boobs or anything... So I swallowed my pride and sent him those photos. Easy money, hey!

A couple of weeks later he texted to say that his company had rejected the photos.

That actually hurt. Funny to admit, but it actually did. I knew that my feet weren't as nice as a young girl's ones. I, too, used to have slim and perfect long legs. Longer than the average! They used to turn heads in the streets. They still do... Although, admittedly, two pregnancies later, that smooth olive skin is a vague memory of my single past. All I have now is purple coloured ankles, red streaks and bumps. Those three surgeries for my varicose veins didn't help my legs look better, either: the damage is permanent. And I am OK with that. After all, our scars are

evidence of what we've been through in our lives. Still, being rejected didn't make me feel good about myself.

'Do you ever feel good about yourself at all?' Alison asks.

This is one damn good question. I have no answer for her and just look down at my (very large) feet.

As of that guy, at least I guess I could take comfort from the thought he probably didn't suspect I was a mum of two. I do present a certain image of myself on social media and go to extra length not to post anything about my private life. So I guess I should really be counting my blessings...

After all these years, I still suffer the damage caused by my height. I know it is all in my mind. I keep on top of the latest body confidence trends and do my best to spread positivity. #loveyourbody and all that stuff. But, actually, deep inside, I am still the same girl I was 40 (ish) years ago. The tallest girl in the world. And I am not enjoying it, not a single bit.

I remember pulling out an old school photo from my Facebook archive and showing it to my son: 'Guess which one am I?' No brainer, really: the tallest one at the back.

This is not what he said, though: 'Eek, mum, you were ugly!!'

Jeez, thanks. So much for trying to improve my self-esteem.

Truth really does hurt.