

## *hen party in London (alone)*

Tataratta-tatta-tatta-tararata (*Sex and the City* polyphonic mobile ringtone).

Nooo. It can't be. He can't be calling me now that I'm on the runway about to take off.

Yet I have no choice but to pick up the phone, so I click the green handset button.

"Erm, hello?"

"Why does it take you so long to answer your goddamn phone? I don't have all day to just sit here and wait for you to find that goddamn mobile in your goddamn bag. So, have you brought your camera? And the voice recorder? You haven't forgotten the *limoncello* from Capri have you?! And did you buy those Galup chocolates? You must impress Sally, otherwise when you get back to the office, you're going to find a post-it stuck to your computer with just two words on it: 'You're fired'".

The voice on the other end of the line is that of my boss, Mr Vintage—so called not because he is fashionably cool, but because he refuses to wear anything but out-moded clothes which smell of moth-balls. In fact, he smells of moth-balls from head to toe.

Fifty-two years old, Mr Vintage has a sexologist of an ex-wife who left him for an art gallery curator, an idiotic thirteen year old son (who only becomes animated when placed before his Wii), and several Hopper paintings scattered across his home (souvenirs picked up during his honeymoon in the States). For years he worked as the accountant of a local weekly paper *The Voice of Monviso*. He then became its sub-editor, and is now its editor-in-chief well and proper. I, on the other hand, am a floundering journalist-publicist. My dreams of glory were shattered by Mr Vintage's Donald Duck tie the day I sat in his office and signed a contract enigmatically headed Co.Co.Pro. (Co-ordinated Collaboration by Project. In other words: "Congratulations, you're consenting to us making a fool out of you, we'll work you to the bone and use you until we need you. After that, we'll simply fire you, all without paying you a single penny in compensation or providing you with any maternity leave. And if you're unhappy with this contractual arrangement, that's not a problem, we'll just call another loser like you because the queue behind you is oh-so very long indeed"). In short: 699 euro (net) per month working forty hours a week (including over-time), all without paid leave and a miserly budget to cover my expenses. As I was about to sign the contract, I thought that I could have earned more money by working as a supermarket cashier on a part-time but permanent basis, complete with paid leave and Christmas bonuses, and plenty of spare time to dedicate to writing. Who knows, I may have become as famous as Anna Sam, the author of the best-seller, *The Tribulations of a Checkout Girl*, who, after having worked at a large supermarket chain for eight years, resigned and dedicated her time to her passions. I signed

the contract anyway, hoping that sometime soon, things would change. Two years have since come and gone, and everything is just as it was, except that now the cost of living has increased. So, to make ends meet, I turn myself into a copywriter and publicist for whoever pays me. And top it all off, I'm about to get married in a month. "Yes, of course I have brought a camera and the chocolates. Now if you will excuse me I really must go. I'm about to take off so I'll call you when I arrive".

I hear him blabber something, but I hang up anyway. Fabulous! For four whole days I won't have to see his face, his sticky, gelled hair and those horrid beige 80's suits and their six-centimetre high shoulder pads.

And after having interviewed Sally Soames and her gallery curator for *New Mag* (the new publication created by Mr Vintage targeted at the younger crowd), I will be able to enjoy the remaining few days by visiting exhibitions, vintage markets and Starbucks.

In fact, this is also my hen party, and a very unusual one at that seeing that I am travelling alone.

Up until last month, my three closest friends, Wolfango, Lucilla and Agata, had planned to join me. Then at the last minute, they ditched me.

But I decided to leave anyway. The paper will cover my flight and sleeping expenses. Everything else will be on me.

After having done some research online, I found a hostel that is near to where I will be interviewing Sally Soames, the legendary photographer of the *Sunday Times*. Her lenses have captured the likes of Andy Warhol, Giorgio Armani, Orson Welles as well as the funeral of Winston Churchill.

It has always been my dream to interview her, and I managed to contact her gallery curator through a childhood friend of my mother.

I pitched the idea to Mr Vintage, who somewhat unexpectedly decided it would be a good idea so as to "lend a less provincial air to our paper", as he so pompously put it. And also because he hopes that Sally will give him a signed photograph in exchange for the Galup chocolates and the *limoncello* from Capri.

I also decided that I would dedicate a few lines in my article to the gallery curator.

A rather adventurous individual, he left his tiny mountain village in Piedmont to travel across Europe and settle in England where he struck it lucky. In the heart of London, he opened a chic café frequented by models, photographers and lawyers (Cherie Blair included).

Next door, he has also opened an art gallery so that after having savoured a salad costing seventeen pounds, you can immerse yourself in art and sip a coffee in one of the City's trendiest nooks.

The gallery curator invited me to stay with him and his family at their London abode, but I preferred to settle for a hostel so that I may come and go as I please. So I booked the "Caledonia Backpackers Hotel" for three nights, which is just five minutes from King's Cross: thirty-six pounds a night, breakfast included. Judging by the pictures online, it doesn't look too bad.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have commenced our descent into London. Please fasten your seatbelts and ensure that your tray tables are securely fastened. The weather in London is mild and sunny. We wish you a pleasant stay in the city".

Perfect. We've landed on time. I pick up my luggage and catch the train into town.

Half an hour later I find myself outside King's Cross Station. Come to think of it, I didn't really do much research on the area but hopefully it will be full of English charm.

But as soon as I step outside, my first thought is: I'm not in Notting Hill. Secondly: I am going to hole myself up in my room for the entire evening. Thirdly: at one of the tables of the

café overlooking the train tracks, J.K. Rowling penned *Harry Potter*. Fourthly: who cares. Thankfully it doesn't take me very long to find Caledonian Road. The pub on the corner looks rather trendy and clashes with the rest of the surrounding buildings. The hostel is right opposite the pub, and by its front door there is a heap of large blue garbage bags and a discarded mattress.

I push the front door and step inside. The receptionist is a man who resembles a toffee-coloured wardrobe. He asks me for my I.D. card and a five pound deposit.

He then points to the stairs on his right, which lead up to the females-only floor. Shit! There's no elevator.

Three flights of stairs later, I step—completely exhausted—into my room. There are four bunk beds, the carpeting is stained and the windows look as though they haven't been cleaned in months.

The bathroom is even worse: the shower is out of order, the crumbling walls are a hideous hue of shocking pink and there single sink, which I will be sharing with ten other people, is leaking.

I'm feeling very much like Elina Brotherus when she first arrived in New York.

But I think that over the next four days, the place could acquire some sort of charm.

After snapping several self-portraits in the miniscule bathroom mirror, I leave for dinner.

I enter into the first restaurant I find nearby, and have the splendid idea of ordering a plate of spaghetti bolognese from the Indian owner who proceeds in taking a container of pre-boiled spaghetti, adding water to reboil the lot and throws in sauce from a tube.

Absolute horror of horrors.

I return to the hostel absolutely starving, having left half of my plate unfinished. Thankfully I had stocked up on plenty of junk food at the airport, so I end my first evening in London in the hostel eating paprika-flavoured crisps and washing them down with Ribena.

The next day I head downstairs to have breakfast in the (unauthorized) basement where I sit at a table near the heater alongside seven complete strangers who are busying themselves with opening strawberry jam jars, pouring orange juice, and making toast as if they were back at home.

They then wash their mugs in the sink and fill them with milk.

Bleugh...

Either I decide to head out and buy something to eat, or I bravely accept to have breakfast here. I go for the second option, but only because I've already paid for it.

At around nine thirty, I drop my key off at the reception where Mr. Toffee-Coloured Wardrobe hands me my I.D. card without uttering a single word.

At ten twenty I'm in front of the National Portrait Gallery. I pay for my ticket to see an exhibition on Julia Margaret Cameron. A woman of noble origins, she was born in Calcutta and lived on the Isle of Wight. The leaflet which accompanies the exhibition reads: "*In 1863, at the age of forty eight, she received as a gift from her daughters a camera which she used to capture friends, relatives and servants, evoking antique paintings of the 1400's and those of contemporary pre-Raphaelites*".

Before leaving I buy a pin of one of her photographs as a souvenir. Who knows, perhaps in forty years it will become a collectable vintage trinket which I will sell rather than wait for my miserly State pension.

When I step outside, Trafalgar Square is immersed in sunshine. I turn on my mobile. Bip-bip. A text message. It's from Marco, my fiancé. I realize that on day two of my London trip,

Marco has texted me just once, Wolfango three, Lucilla two and Agata none, whilst Mr Vintage has called me four times—of course I never picked up.

I glance at my watch. It is seven minutes past twelve. I decide to go to the Saatchi Gallery rather than accept the kind invitation to lunch extended by the gallery curator and his wife (who is of course English). I take the South Walk Jubilee line to Westminster and ten minutes later, I'm in a queue with thirty-odd other idiots like me who pay eight pounds and fifty pence to see:

- a slaughtered cow cut into ten pieces;
- the head of a cow placed in a box along with tens of flies asphyxiated by the lack of air and by the stench of the blood of the poor decapitated creature;
- an unmade bed with condoms, tights, the Persona test, a packet of Marlboros, a stuffed toy dog, and a host of other things thrown upon it. All followed by:
- a sheep and a shark suspended in a jar filled with formaldehyde;
- a head of an artist sketched with his own blood
- a Mini Cooper entirely covered in tiny multicoloured balls. The final outcome: a whole lot of perplexities and a healthy dose of nausea right before lunch.

But at least I can say that I have been to the Saatchi Gallery.

“Yeah, great...” Marco would say.

In the end my rumbling tummy has the better of me, so I head off to the Tate Modern's café for a large slice of carrot cake and a tall coffee.

My appointment with Sally and the gallery curator is at four.

It's best I hurry up. It's starting to drizzle and I haven't even brought my umbrella.

I nevertheless manage to get there on time.

The gallery curator takes us to an Italian café nearby, and after introducing everyone, leaves.

I immediately notice that Sally looks considerably older than her photograph which I had found on the internet. In any case, she is still a beautiful woman. Before we start recording the interview, she wants to know a little bit about me.

“So, sweetie, in your email you wrote that you've got a column in your paper on recipes. That sounds fascinating! Could you possibly give me one? In fact, why don't you send me all the recipes that you have written? I absolutely adooooore Italian food!” she exclaims.

“Well, actually...” I am slightly taken aback, but I decide to tell her the truth. And anyway, she lives in London so I won't run the risk that my readers find out my little secret.

“To be honest, I don't really know how to cook. In fact, I can't cook. When I started working for the paper three years ago, this was the only column my boss offered me. I accepted it and decided I would copy recipes which I found online and add a little story of my own on the side.” I reply (conveniently forgetting to mention that I pass off the work as being my own).

Sally looks rather shocked.

After a few seconds she starts giving me her recipe for a bolognese sauce, and tells me how, when she was twenty six and married with a little boy to raise and a temporary job to juggle, she always managed to prepare dinner every night.

What a bore! I cannot believe that a patronizing English woman is giving me cooking lessons! I remember just in time that I have yet to give her her little gifts, so I take out the chocolates and the *limoncello* from my milky-white Biasia bag (which I found at Rahma's little vintage shop for just twenty euro).

“Oh that's so sweet of you, Emma. Thank you! I really love Italian chocolate and alcoholic drinks!”.

Thank god, I've managed to distract her. OK, so the gifts are not mine but she doesn't have to know that. Sally too has a gift for me: her autographed photography book of world-famous personalities dedicated to me. I can't believe it. As soon as Mr Vintage is going to see it, he is going to become green with envy because for him, she gives me just a miserable autographed postcard.

It's well over six thirty when the gallery curator picks us up to go for dinner with his artist friends at Covent Garden's "Sapori" pizzeria. Amongst the group, I notice Massimiliano, a twenty-seven year-old artist-cum-waiter.

By night he serves cappuccinos at a café and by day he works as an artist in his tiny apartment in Wyvil Road. He is dressed very much like a chevalier, complete with lord-like gloves, two large needle-shaped earrings in his left ear and razor-short hair. *Très charmante*. I should introduce him to Wolfango, as I remember how once he mentioned that "I don't really fancy Italian men. I prefer the English".

We are seated at our table.

Sally chats away with the gallery curator and I find myself in front of Max.

It really is *such* a pity that he is gay.

"So for how long have you been living in London?" I ask.

"It's already been five years".

"You know, as soon as I saw you I thought of introducing you to my best friend Wolfy? He too is something of an artist, a photographer slash stylist, and he's twenty five. What do you think?".

"Well, I wouldn't know. First tell me a little about him—he replies, laughing—For example: does he manage to live off of his art in Turin?".

"Well, not really. He also works five hours a day as a rubbish collector. But then for the rest of the time he wanders around town taking photographs of strangers, of his friends dressed up as *Alice in Wonderland* or comes out shopping with me at H&M".

"Hmmm...interesting..."

"I absolutely adore him! With him I share everything from my passion for the eighties to my lip gloss. Everything, that is, except men".

Max laughs. "What does he look like?".

"Quiffed hair, skinny jeans, All Stars perennially at his feet. His look is all about glam-street. I'll send you a picture of him when I get back home. But enough about that, tell me about you. You know I was thinking that I could write an article about you entitled *Max Vic: Almost Famous in London in Between Art and Cappuccinos*".

"Ahahaha... that's actually quite good! So, are you ready to take notes?".

"Of course, dear".

"In short: I was born in the Italian town of Casale Monferrato. I have a twin brother who still lives there. As soon as I arrived in London I started working at a bar. I then contacted Sally's gallery curator and found my agent—a Japanese—through an ad in a newspaper. But he's practically useless as he's never sold any of my works." Our conversation-interview is interrupted only by a pizza, an espresso and a sublime tiramisu' baked by Costanza, the wife of the pizzeria's owner. At around eleven forty it's hugs and kisses all round as we exchange email addresses. I head back to the hostel in a black cab generously paid for by the gallery curator, whose last words to me were "Make sure you go straight inside your hostel. The area is not exactly the safest in the city". How very reassuring. Saturday morning arrives as though waking up in a run-down hostel was the most natural thing in the world. There is the usual breakfast in the basement, the usual mugs, milk and burnt toast. Only the faces are

different. I begin to think that after three days here, even the dish cloth has lost its artistic-contemporary appeal. Today on the kitchen table there is marmalade and/or marmalade. Given the dire choice, one hour later I'm at Starbucks in Portobello, where I order a frappuccino. I sip it as I think of how much I'm craving to taste something decent. Yet I find myself wondering how on earth is it possible to drink something which tastes this bad? It's because I've paid two pounds eighty five pence for it, I tell myself. And what if I ask the Japanese waiter behind the bar to exchange it with something else? He would probably smile at me and tell me in his broken English that it isn't possible.

Yet everyone seems perfectly comfortable prancing around with these large twenty centimeter-high cups filled with ice, whipped cream and crême caramel. After having sipped through my first layer of whipped cream, I'm already full. In any case I bring the cup with me celebrity-style as I hunt around the market for a bargain. Another question: why doesn't Starbucks give you a normal plastic spoon rather than these annoying wooden sticks which scratch your tongue?

Lost in these thoughts, I walk around the various stalls whilst my frappuccino appears to never end. I can't believe the amount of useless rubbish that's on sale.

Sure, it's Portobello, but there is still plenty of useless rubbish around.

All of a sudden I hear yells of compatriots nearby: I realise that Italians in London are recognizable not by their Invicta bag as in the 90's, but by their Quecua money bags tied around their waists.

On the other hand, I notice that the English girls all usually have something of a beer belly and that true Londoners wade (rather irritated) through the throng of tourists with a cup of boiling hot Starbucks coffee in hand.

I notice a rather interesting family walking amongst the crowd: he is tall and wears a coat made from black horse hair; she is a tall black woman with a stunning body, glasses and a curly diva-like haircut.

She holds the hand of girl with almond-shaped eyes who is dressed in the latest threads.

Suddenly I'm distracted by several shiny retro pins that are lying on a stall a couple of steps away from me. I absolutely adore retro pins.

I can't *not* buy one.

In fact, I buy two, both in silver. The first is in the shape of a feather, whilst the second brooch is in the shape of a flower.

I consider them to be another investment for my future pension.

And I've heard that vintage brooches are so next season, as mentioned in *Vogue's* latest "Accessories Special" supplement.

I spend my last afternoon in London walking around the parks and travelling on the tube observing people: I notice that young mothers wear flowered rain coats, little girls sport knee high wellies and the Chinese seem to be everywhere.

I also use the tube to pass some time.

I am struck by a rather eclectically-dressed guy wearing: shiny black Nureyev-style tights, a huge solid gold *Godfather*-style ring, a Nike cap, a white t-shirt, a scarf, a Segor watch, trainers and a Jansport bag pack. As Wolfango would say, "Class isn't water. And neither a rum *cooler*". In other words: the guy has a shitty dress sense. To end my day in style I decide to go to the theater to watch *Chicago*. I managed to buy a ticket at the stand in Leicester Square for twenty-seven pounds fifty. The musical and the atmosphere were just like I had imagined them; it's a pity I had to watch the show whilst arguing with a rude moron who was sitting in front of me.

He was talking rather animatedly in his friend's ear and I, being rather short by nature, couldn't see very much. After having put up with his antics for over half an hour, I kindly

asked him to lower his voice. Instead of receiving an expected apology along the lines of “Sorry, excuse me”, he looked at me with his beady little eyes and replied “No, I can’t”. After which he continued chatting away louder than ever. “Oh really? So you want to fight? Ok then let’s fight!” I exclaim in Italian as I get up to find the theater assistant who promptly asks the annoying gentleman to change seats.

Ah, I can finally enjoy the show! It had been years that I had been dreaming of watching *Chicago* in a London theatre, wearing my blue Balenciaga bag, my white Krizia shirt, vintage A.N.G.E.L.O. jeans and a pair of Moschino wedges. Minus the bag, shirt, jeans and shoes, my dream has finally come true. I’ve had to make do without these little details, but when I’ll become a famous journalist, I’ve promised myself to come back and watch the show in style. The musical ends shortly after eleven.

I wonder whether I should get a cab or jump onto the tube. I peer into my *100drine* (pronounced ‘centdrine’) wallet and decide to go for the latter

By the time I get back to the hostel it’s well past midnight and Caledonian Road is completely deserted.

Mr. Toffee-Coloured Wardrobe has been substituted by an Indian wearing a nauseating floral 90’s style shirt and thick, black-rimmed glasses.

He hands me my keys and manages to say “Thank you” five times in less than two minutes.

I think I preferred the less talkative Mr Toffee-Coloured Wardrobe.

It’s the day of my departure and I have breakfast for the last time in the basement, where I find that the filthy dish cloth has grown legs and has started walking.

My plane is due to leave at lunchtime from Stansted and I get to the airport on time. I even manage to pick up a bag of onion-flavoured crisps and the latest copy of *Marie Claire UK*, which includes a free plastic Top Shop bag for just an extra four pounds.

A real bargain.

I arrive in Milan in the early afternoon, and whilst I wait for my coach bound for Torino Porta Nuova, I get the urge to pick up a Big Mac Menu. As I wait for my food, I observe the girl behind the counter. Five times out of five, the McDonald waitresses are plain and without a trace of mascara.

It’s probably some sort of marketing strategy.

My mobile starts ringing and “Mr Vintage” appears on the screen. I pick up after the fifth ring.

“So how did it go? Why weren’t you picking up your goddamn phone?! Did you bring back one of Sally’s autographed photographs for me? And did you manage to carry out a decent interview? I want it by tomorrow in my postbox with five photographs, ten o’clock sharp”.

He hangs up without giving me a chance to say a word.

I keep thinking that it’s about time that I hire someone to beat him up. That way he’ll stop bugging me for a while.

I receive another call. This time it’s Marco.

“Ciao, it’s me. How are you? I’m going to come and pick you up at the station in about an hour and a half. Oh and...You know, I really missed you...”

A sweet phrase said by the man that will become my husband next month.

## *preparations for the wedding*

At seven thirty my alarm goes off.

I have a quick breakfast and head straight to the computer still dressed in my pajamas.

At nine forty-seven, I e-mail over to Mr Vintage the article with my photos of London attached. This time I've just managed to meet the deadline.

My articles are usually always late.

But such delay is excusable, after all, my creative streak has a rather slow biorhythm which only picks up when a deadline is just hours away.

I've been like this since I was in high school: perennially late but with excellent excuses. As I got older, things worsened. Instead of studying, I would steal *Gioia* and *Donna Moderna* from my mother, and *Grand Hotel*, *Confidenze* and *Intimità* from my grandmother, and would spend the entire afternoon reading them and cutting out images for my creative-fashion collages. By evening, after dinner I would rush to finish my school work and would stay up until midnight. But I still have some delightful memories of those afternoons.

The e-mail has been sent.

I finally get dressed and head to pick Marco up. I've taken the morning off from work so as to sort out several things for the wedding. Marco is as punctual as ever, in fact he's early. He's happy to see me and gives me a long, passionate kiss. Before we head off to the large home décor center 'Chiale: Everything And More', we stop for a coffee with cream and croissants at Tiffany. I give him a very brief summary of my London trip as he needs to get

back to the office soon. I then get straight to business and start looking through the wedding registry which Gabriella, the kind blonde lady helping us out and who is one of the shop owner's nine children, has given us.

"I really think we could have set a later date, perhaps sometime in late summer. At least we wouldn't be running around like headless chickens!", I exclaim. "You know why we couldn't do that, otherwise my parents wouldn't have given us the flat". Right, I was forgetting all about his parents' condition and the godforsaken apartment. Marco's parents are rather sweet, but all too often they have too much say in what we should (or shouldn't) be doing.

His Piedmontese father is a self-made, highly successful surveyor who invested much of his wealth in properties. Having just retired, he spends his time glued to the sports channel on Sky or plays golf. His mother comes from a tiny village in the south of Italy, Stornarella, and she "moved to the north" when she was an infant. After her first child and after not having slept for three consecutive years, she decided that perhaps it would be best to have no more children. She has never lifted a finger in her entire life, but she has acquired the skill of spending her husband's money and using it to groom herself to perfection. Her husband proudly shows her off when they attend dinners hosted by the Club of Officials of Turin. They absolutely adore Marco, but they took it rather badly when he decided to work in an architect's studio as an underpaid trainee rather than take up the family business. Since then, they started to impose certain rules, the strictest of which was raised one winter evening at the dinner table six months ago: "My dear son, your mother and I have long discussed the matter and we have decided that should you want to move into the apartment that we have bought for you, you're going to have to get married by the time you are thirty and prove to us that you can financially support yourself", declared his father out of the blue whilst talking over the news on TV.

Considering the fact that his thirtieth birthday was exactly seven months away, that same night Marco rung me up and...

"Hi Emma, how are you?"

"What do mean? Fine, of course, just like I was two hours ago when we had met up for our usual coffee".

"Right. Listen, I was thinking, would you like to meet up for another coffee? I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes. It's urgent".

I had thought of everything except of a wedding.

Of course, we had mentioned something about moving in together a couple of times recently, but a word as serious as "wedding" had certainly never been uttered.

"So, what is so urgent that we've had to meet up for the second time tonight?"

"Well, I've been meaning to ask you this for a while...I was thinking: why don't we get married? We've been together for four years, we get along well, you know, we can't live like this forever."

For a whole minute, I couldn't get my head around his question.

"Mmm... We haven't really talked about it before. But I could think about it. Perhaps we could set a date in a year or so".

"I was thinking much earlier than that. Let's just do it, let's be alternative and take it as it comes. I'm sure we could arrange everything in five to six months".

"Are you completely out of your mind?! That's impossible! We need at least a year. And anyway, what's all this rush? What is going on?"

Marco couldn't stop hiding the real reason behind his urgency, and so he spilled the beans. Had I been a hopeless romantic, I would have smashed a chair over his head and eventually said yes, not before forcing him to get down on one knee, whip out a Tiffany ring box, and ask for my hand in marriage in true fairytale style. Lucky for him, I have never really

believed in Prince Charming, who I just see as a moron in tights. So, after having thought things through and done the maths, I decided that his offer wasn't bad.

After all, getting married would have given us the chance to have the guests buy us all the things necessary for our new house and maybe even manage to raise some funds for the honeymoon. Something that would have been impossible had we decided to move in together.

Six months have passed since that evening and we have almost finished preparing for the big day.

Marco's parents have given us the keys to our house, a renovated apartment from the '60s located in the heart of the city. It's small, just fifty-five square meters, but enough for two workers with temporary contracts like us. My parents will pay for the wedding dinner, the florist, the rent for the hall at the Fenestrelle Fort, our new bedroom, my wedding dress, shoes, makeup, and the hairdresser. They really couldn't afford anything more than that. In fact, paying for these things alone is going to be quite a mission, but they didn't want to look out of place compared to the other in-laws. And to think that just a year or so ago, things were very different: they could afford two holidays a year, a couple of weekends at the beach, two months at Bardonecchia during the winter, and often, they would go out for dinner with friends. Then, thanks to a less-than-reliable private banker, they lost bucket loads of money on the stock market and were forced to change their spending habits overnight. Thankfully I'm an only child, otherwise I would have had to share the few things that are left with the hypothetical brother my father would have loved to have. And so, thanks to our familial sponsors, we'll just have to pay for our kitchen and our living room, both from IKEA (and which will wipe out our savings).

For the bathroom my uncle is going to restore several bits of furniture which he picked up at a rubbish heap. He has assured us that he's going to make them look brand new (we hope). Our friends will provide for our honeymoon to Estonia and a few of them even took part in our "painting party" last week (suggested to me by Michael, the half Italian, half Canadian guy from Blow Up): an entire day dedicated to painting our house in exchange for plenty of beer, kebabs, and live music played by dj Dallomo, who was called in for the occasion. Our relatives will give us items taken from the wedding registry, whilst my dearest friends have taken care of the creative side of things.

Wolfango took an artistic-contemporary photograph of two rings painted on a wall of the Regio theater. During spring afternoons, the theatre is filled with young writers who practice dances from the ghettos of New York, having suddenly discovered that Turin is an achingly hip city.

He then mounted the photograph onto a file containing all of the essential details, and *voilà*, our unique wedding invites were created. Of course, Wolfy will also be our official photographer on the day itself (free of charge).

Agata and Marco's witness have bought us the rings.

Lucilla has taken care of the *bomboniere*, small gifts which we will be giving to all our guests at the wedding reception. She has gone for a vintage-cool idea, picking up a hundred and ten tin boxes from the local parish and filling them with sachets containing *butun da preivi*, small liquorice sweets that are in the shape of old buttons that once adorned the robes of priests, and which grandmother Olga Dionigia adores.

And so, thanks to some excellent team work, we have managed to contain our costs without adding too much to the profits of the weddings business.

At eleven forty-five, we drop by the ‘Kennedys of wedding registries’ to check on what gifts from our wedding registry have already been bought. We then head for lunch at a small restaurant located a few steps from the town hall, and which will be responsible for providing the food on our big day. We have an appointment with the owner Guido Red Devil, so called because of his ginger hair and pointy eyebrows. As we step inside, two young women turn around and scrutinize us from head to toe.

“What are they looking at?” I wonder. Perhaps they are noticing that between Marco and I, there is a distance of twenty seven centimeters *à la* Eva Longoria and Tony Parker. Except that for the moment, I am just desperate (thanks to the wedding preparations) and will not ever really be a housewife (since I am going to have to work until I am seventy). In addition, Marco doesn’t play basketball. And our two salaries put together would probably just about cover the bill for dinner which the two stars would pay at one of those trendy LA restaurants. My thoughts are distracted by a fifty-something year old gentleman who is yelling down a mobile phone as he motions to us to join him at his table. It’s Guido ‘Red Devil’. “So kids, are we finally going to decide what we’re going to do about your menus? I really must get to work, there’s only one month left to the big day goddamnit!”. “We’ll just go over it one more time and then I think we can confirm it, right Marco?” I say. He nods in approval.

We spend half an hour going through a list which has everything from fried prawns to fruit salad and a Zurich Cake (complete with white chocolate flakes), I manage to strike a deal on the price: twenty-three euro per guest (tablecloths, cutlery, plates and glasses included) in exchange for an article on Guido Red Devil in *New Mag* and a discount on a full-page advert in *The Voice of Monviso* (I just need to make sure I remember to inform the person in charge of advertising).

Once we’ve agreed on the details, Marco heads to the local town hall where he works as an urban counselor.

It’s his second job which, along with being an architect, earns him 1.100 euro a month (excluding pension benefits and sick pay) and has him working forty five hours a week (Saturdays included). Thankfully in the last two years he has managed to save up some cash, often eating at home with mum and dad and using his gasoline-run Panda, which had been a gift from his dad when he graduated from university.

I, on the other hand, drive to the office and arrive in ten minutes. I walk by Mr Vintage’s office, which is unusually empty.

Ah, of course, it’s Thursday. Usually he goes to play bingo in the afternoon at an old-people’s community center. He claims that being around all those old people makes him feel young. If he says so...

Fabulous, that means that I can dedicate myself to some healthy time-wasting.

I head over to the open space and pop round to say hello to my two *New Mag* colleagues, Virginia and Tati.

Tati frantically starts asking me a thousand questions about my London trip.

Virginia has a fake smile plastered all over her face. She had wanted to go on the trip and so she is green with envy.

As I start telling them about my adventures, I notice a post-it on my desk: “Tomorrow you have to be over at our place by 4 p.m. for Matteo’s private tuition. Then at 6 p.m., bring him to his tennis lesson and call up his mother to remind her that she needs to pick him up later”.

Arghhhhh.

One of these days this moron is going to drive me crazy. Not only do I have to give private lessons to his idiotic son, I have now become his personal driver. The problem is I can’t

exactly send him to hell. With my Co.Co.Pro. contract, he could fire me as and when he pleases.

I notice Tati reading the post-it over my shoulder. To distract me, she brings me over to the coffee machine.

“Come on Emma, don’t take it personally. If he asks you to help him it’s because deep down, he respects you.”

“Ooooo sure, deep *deep* down he respects me”.

“ Well look: you’re the only one out of all of us which he has recently sent abroad. That surely must mean something?”.

“Maybe...”

Sometimes I wonder what it is that stops me from looking for another job. But I know very well what the answer to that is: whether I work here or elsewhere, the situation would be identical.

If not worse.

I once went to visit a friend of mine, Sara, who lives in Turin and works for *La Stampa*.

Whilst we were chatting away over coffee, I discovered that a temporary writer at her newspaper is paid two euro, including VAT. At *New Mag* I’m paid much more.

Of course, my dream would be to write for *Vanity Fair*.

I absolutely adore the magazine, and have subscribed to it for the past four years. I even gave it as a gift to my grandmother who, since discovering the *diretur*’s passion for strawberry and rhubarb jam, has made me promise that, sooner or later, I will bring him a wheelbarrow full of the stuff.

“Do you seriously think I would leave from this tiny town and sit on a train for two hours straight to go to *Vanity* with a jar of jam? Seriously grandma, I sometimes think you’re crazier than me”.

“Well then I’ll just call Adelina and we’ll go on our own”.

“Yeah sure, I can really picture you two wandering the streets of Milan...OK, OK, I promise that when the time comes, I’ll do you this favour. Happy now?”.

I devour the articles by Paola Jacobbi, who I consider to be one of the best journalists around. For the past two years I have been sending emails to the editor-in-chief practically every day, sending him my articles with a copy of my CV.

I’ve even started a blog on style.it, where I recount my tragic-comic adventures at the paper, just to get back at Mr Vintage. Of course, I’ve chosen a *nome de plume* to remain anonymous, otherwise I’d surely get into trouble. I sign off as Lucy Maud Montgomery, the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. The other day I published one of my favourite phrases taken from the novel: “*Similar souls are not as rare as I thought they were, it’s splendid to discover that there are many in the world!*”.

I also wrote it on the blog of the *diretur*, revealing to him in a previous email that I was the individual behind Lucy.

And the same evening, I received a surprise! I discovered that he had replied to my comment, writing: “I love this too. Emma has a soul as poetic as her name”. Wow, I would never have expected this much from him...I’ll now print it off and frame it tomorrow.

In the meantime, a friend of Tati’s has dropped by the coffee area for a quick chat.

“Did you know that Emma was in New York when the Twin Towers collapsed? That’s where it all started for her!”, exclaimed Tati.

“All what started?” asks Gloria, a slim brunette with freckles.

“Her passion for writing and for wanting to work for a newspaper”.

“Really? That’s so cool! I wish something like that had happened to me”.

“Come on Emma, tell us how you ended up working for *The Voice of Monviso*”.

“But I’ve already repeated it like ten thousand times. And anyway, it’s been quite a while since it all happened”.

“No, come on, tell us, I’m dying to hear all about it!” insists Gloria.

“OK. Just for you”. I take a sip from my macchiato I start my story.

“So here’s the short version: it was September 2001 and I was in New York visiting my friend Helene who is a dj and host on an all-black radio. Seeing that she worked all day, I would enjoy wandering the streets of the city on my own. Five days before the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, I thought that I would go and check out the view from the top of the tallest of the two towers. If you want I’ll email you the photographs that I took that afternoon. The weekend before the tragedy, Helene and I headed to Connecticut to see her parents. We were meant to head back to New York on the 11<sup>th</sup> at nine in the morning. But then what happened happened. Our plans had to change and so we stayed in Connecticut. That evening I wrote an email to our paper as well as to *La Stampa* describing my feelings on the tragic event. Both newspapers published my work, our paper ran it on the front page, perhaps because they had nothing better to print. Once I returned to Italy, I rang up the editor and arranged to meet him. I brought along my CV, we talked a bit about what had happened in the States and agreed that I would start a three month-long internship. Unpaid. I then signed my Co.Co.Pro. contract. And here I am. Earning close to nothing but living for journalism”. “Wow, what a story...It sounds like something taken out of a movie script. At least you are paid for what you do. I’ve been working for over a year with another local newspaper. They don’t pay me a cent, not even when I travel abroad for a write up. They keep telling me it’s all part of my training. But I keep asking myself when this silly training is going to stop”, laments Gloria. “My dear, it’s never going to end. But don’t worry, at least you’re in good company”, replies Tati, hastily resolving the matter.

“Rather, what sublime culinary recipe are you going to prepare for the next issue of *New Mag*, Emma? My mum tried making your spicy ice-lollies with balsamic vinegar but she almost choked to death!”. “Are you nuts?! I keep telling you that I copy the recipes from weird websites or I just make them up, so I have no idea what the final result is. Make sure you warn your mum”. “What?!—exclaims Gloria—You have a culinary column and you can’t cook?”. “Ehmmm...Not really. Let’s just say I prefer to eat rather than cook, although I can prepare a couple of simple dishes. My mum went to church to light a candle for San Francesco Caracciolo (the protector of chefs) and she’s giving me private lessons to make sure that Marco doesn’t turn anorexic after we get married. And then my grandma, Olga Dionigia, is going to give me that fabulous robot, Bimby, for my wedding: apparently it cooks miracles and that way I will have solved my problems!” I reply.

“Yeah...”, says Gloria somewhat perplexed.

“I’m sorry girls”, I say trying to hide my embarrassment “What time is it?”.

“Almost five thirty”.

“Oh I really must go. I’m supposed to meet Wolfango for an aperitif. I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye Gloria, see you soon!”.

I arrive beneath the Casa del Gallo earlier than anticipated, and I already know that Wolfango is going to be late. He’s the only one who manages to beat me when it comes to not being punctual.

Beep beep: “Sorry hun, I’m going to be late. I’ll explain everything later. But don’t worry, Agata and Lucilla should already be there. Kisses. W”.

I look around but there is no sign of my two girlfriends. To pass the time, I have a look at the windows of a boutique nearby.

The clothes on display are not really my style, but I go in anyway. Who knows, I might come across a hidden bargain.

“Good evening. Do you mind if I just take a look around?”, I ask the saleswoman with her freshly painted nails and perfect coiffure.

Several items aren’t bad, but most would suit the average, upper-class middle-aged woman. I’m just about to leave when I notice a rose-coloured jacket in shantung silk with a retro cut and waterfall sleeves. On it there’s a price tag which reads: “Last piece. Special price: 100 euro”. Interesting.

“Excuse me, could I please try this jacket?”.

“Of course. If you’d like there is also a matching corset and skirt, all for 250 euro. It’s the last outfit. Size 12”.

Hard to resist such a tempting offer. “Sure, I’ll try the whole outfit. It’s just my size”.

Incredible. This is a miracle: a month to my wedding and I have finally found my dress.

After having been all over Turin, I finally find it in here, right beneath the bar where I usually meet my friends for drinks.

I try out the outfit. I would just need to have the corset adjusted slightly. The tight-fitting skirt is perfect, it even has a small train.

Sure, it’s not like the one made by Vera Wang for Avril Lavigne, but it will look perfect with my vintage pumps picked up at the local flea market last year.

And for the bag, an absolutely indispensable accessory for a vintage fan like me, I’ll just pop round my Indian friend Rahma’s vintage shop, “Dress-Cycle”, where I occasionally help her out as a vintage consultant in exchange for some dresses and trinkets.

“Perfect—I say as I come out of the dressing room with my wedding dress—Do you accept debit cards?”. I’ll pay for it now and then my mother will give me the money. Well and truly satisfied of my bargain, I head upstairs to the third floor of the mirrored-building in the main square of the city. I ring the bell and a waitress opens the door to a New York-style loft, which is where we usually meet for our aperitifs. Agata and Lucilla are seated on one of the red and orange sofas sipping on their dry Martinis. I go and order a fruit drink.

“Hi Emma!—Lucilla comes over to the bar as soon as she sees me—Welcome back. So how did your trip to London go? You must fill me in on all the details! What’s inside that huge bag? Didn’t you say you were going turn over a new leaf and stop buying useless things now that you’re going to get married?”.

“Exactly”, I reply.

“Exactly what?”.

“This isn’t just another useless purchase but my wedding dress. Do you want to see it?”.

“Wow, so you’ve finally found it! It was about time. Come on, show us!” exclaims Agata, who in the meantime had joined us.

“No, you can’t! According to Patrizia’s wedding etiquette, only the bride’s mother is allowed to see it before the wedding, otherwise it brings bad luck!”, exclaims Lucilla.

“I’m sorry, who on earth is Patrizia? I’ve never heard of her”.

“Wasn’t it ‘Wedding Etiquette by Madame Letizia’?”.

“They’re related: Patrizia was her less successful cousin”.

“Listen, who cares about Patrizia and Letizia. I’ll show it to you anyway. You can shut your eyes if you want. Ta-daah!What do you think?”.

“Darling it’s fantastic!”, screams a voice from the entrance of the bar. “It’s sooo you! Where did you get it?”.

The voice is Wolfango’s, who has arrived late as usual.

“In the shop downstairs. Amazing, don’t you think?”.

Agata is slightly irritated.

“I left the office half an hour early and drove like a madwoman just to get here on time. Where on earth have you been??”.

“I was at home. Sooo sorry my dear, but it was too important—he replies—I was chatting online with a guy from Manchester, Liam, whom I met on Facebook last month. Have I told you about him?”

“No, you probably forgot...”, replies Agata sarcastically.

“In any case...I’ve discovered we have lots in common: from our taste in music bands of the 80’s to shopping at H&M and photography. He’s thinking of moving to Turin this fall to take up architecture at university. Wouldn’t that be fabulous? In any case I’m going to Manchester to see him this summer. I’ve already booked my flights. I know he’s my kinda guy, I can just feel it”.

That’s when I remember Max. “You know, whilst I was in London I met a waiter-cum-artist who I think you’d like. If you want I can give you his email address”.

“Thanks, but first I want to meet Liam. What if he’s the man of my dreams? We could get married when we’re thirty and adopt a Chinese kid”, he replies.

We spend an hour chatting away, talking about everything from my wedding preparations and the weird love story between Lucilla and the dentist who rents his flat out to her for five days a week in Turin whilst he works in Milan, to Agata’s upcoming business trip and Wolfango’s new flame and his strange Flickr profile picture where he’s sporting red boxers, a tight Chanel-like jacket and a black eye.

When we get up to leave it’s well past eight in the evening. As I am about to pay my bill, my mobile starts ringing. “Can’t you change this annoying *Sex and the City* ring tone?! I’ve been hearing it for a whole year!”, groans Agata. I throw a friendly insult her way and pick up. “Hello?”.

“Emma, mark this date on your agenda”. It’s Mr Vintage. “Next Saturday you’re going to interview Raoul Bova at Desire. I’ve managed to get us a real bargain: you will interview him in exchange for their three-page advert on *New Mag*”.

“Well, actually....”, I just about manage to reply.

“Don’t even think about telling me that you can’t, or that you have to go to some pre-wedding rehearsal or some other rubbish. You’re going. OK, see you tomorrow in the office. Oh and I saw the mayor at lunch today and he told me he liked your interview with Sally Soames. He offered us two free magazine stands at the next Fair of the Ox in March. It will be free advertising for us, Travet. Watch and learn!”.

*traslation by Rossella Frigerio*