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Real Life

Written by Melissa Kite

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Real Life

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The Wedding Cancellation Planner

In which I ditch a perfectly nice man at the altar and embark on an inclement voyage to a mythical place called ‘inner fulfilment’.

Despite being inundated with plaudits for doing it, I simply cannot recommend calling off a wedding. It sounds exciting and dynamic, as if it might have a lot to do with being true to oneself, but it isn't really. It's a daft thing to do. If you have managed to get a man to agree to marry you in the traditional British way – frogmarching him down the high street to H. Samuel after warning him that your mother won't take much more of this – go through with it, I say. Because ten years later, when you're approaching forty and no one else even vaguely commodious has come along, you will regret calling off that wedding more than you would think it possible to regret anything. You will cry yourself to sleep at night thinking it would have been better to have married a man you frogmarched to H. Samuel than to be in bed alone with a cat sleeping on your head.

When I called off my wedding everyone was unfeasibly excited about it. ‘Oh you’re so brave,’ people would exclaim rapturously. It was as if I was calling off my wedding on behalf of bored, married people everywhere. ‘I could never have done it,’ they would say wistfully. ‘Yes,’ I remember thinking, ‘you could never have done it because you are too sensible. Only I do stupid, impulsive things like calling off a wedding.’

‘Well, if it’s not right, it’s not right . . .’ Yes, but I have no idea if it’s not right. Or not not right. I couldn’t tell you one way or another, even if you extraordinarily rendered me to Guantanamo and had me thoroughly water-boarded. I know nothing of any substance about whether or not I should get married to this man, who is incredibly nice to me and who I like a lot, but then I like a lot of people a lot. It doesn’t mean I want to marry them all. Marriage, when I was staring down the barrel of it, seemed to me to be essentially about the following: a) writing a cheque for £1,160 for a dress I didn’t much like, b) changing my name to a name I didn’t like at all, c) staging a logistically nightmarish party I was sure I would actively dislike and d) moving to a starter home in the M4 corridor. I’m still not certain what a starter home in the M4 corridor is, but it scares the bejesus out of me. I’m pretty sure it could be a pre-fab on a slip road overlooking the Welcome Break service station just outside Reading.

What I cannot understand is why more women don’t get cold feet about all this. I can’t be the only girl who’s had a panic about the small print of the holy estate. Is there some sort of conspiracy to cover up the number of doubters? Has

someone bribed them to stay silent for seven years, when inevitably they then divorce and get out of it anyway? Or am I blazing a trail by owning up to being extremely cross about the whole thing *before* I do it? (This would be just my luck. I always end up trail-blazing by accident.)

The worst thing about an impending wedding is the name-changing business. I lie awake at night worrying about who originally came up with the idea of the woman taking the man's name. My own pet theory is as follows: scientists have established that we're all descended from the same great mother ape.* Clearly, at some point, one of the female descendants of this great mother ape decided to give up her name. I cannot countenance the possibility that the great mother ape herself gave up her name. That would be too big a betrayal to bear. Possibly a lesser female ape called Oo-Oo got together with an ape called Ah-Ah and felt so loved up she started answering to his name. Another possible scenario is that Ah-Ah, in the first ever fit of chauvinistic pique, beat his chest particularly vehemently one day and insisted that Oo-Oo answer to his name from now on because his self-esteem had taken a bit of a knock in a fight with another male ape and he needed to make himself feel better.

In either case, some woman must have been called something original to herself at some point in the history of the universe. And then when Mrs Oo-Oo sold out, the

*Dear Creationists, I'm really sorry about this but it's true. Also, Father Christmas doesn't come down all the chimneys himself. He has elves helping him.

whole individual identity of women thing was lost forever. When you think about it like this, it seems unlikely that any woman on earth has a name that's actually hers. Doesn't that get your goat? Doesn't that make you think this marriage business might be profoundly wrong?

Although I'm the only person I know who has called off a wedding, I feel sure that there will be more of this in the future when everyone realizes I am right, as they surely will. As such, for the budding entrepreneurs among you, there must be an important emerging market in smartphone wedding cancellation apps and wedding cancellation greetings cards. For example: 'Sorry to hear you've called off your wedding, hope you have fun, wherever you're heading.'

Confession: it wasn't the first wedding I had called off. Strictly speaking, I have form on this. Fifteen years earlier I spurned the engagement entreaties of a nice Scottish boy called David, who I had met on a campsite in France aged fourteen.

I don't think you should dismiss this prospect out of hand on account of my youth. Looking back, I reckon David could well have been The One. He was tall, dark, handsome, clever and kind. I have never managed to combine these qualities in a boyfriend since. On which basis, I reckon my first boyfriend could well have been the apex of my romantic life. All conventional wit and wisdom points to romance being a journey that gets better and better, until you meet the love of your life aged around twenty-eight – or a supposedly hair-raising thirty-four if you're Bridget Jones – but in my

experience it starts off well enough then gets progressively worse until, aged forty, you are on your knees, swearing to whatever god will listen that you will never, ever do it again. In this respect, love is a bit like chronic alcoholism.

With hindsight, if I had known that I would only meet one suitable man in my entire life I would have accepted David's proposal. But, of course, I didn't. I thought I had a lifetime of fantastic encounters with the opposite sex in front of me.

When David proposed I told him where to go, then I forgot about him immediately and became obsessed with an obnoxious young buck at the tennis club called Glen, who was famous for two things: he was the best looking boy in town and he only had nine fingers. The story was that he had staged an accident at his father's timber yard so he could claim compensation. It all went a bit pear-shaped when he only managed to cut off half his little finger, resulting in a paltry £2,000 payout, which, for the trouble involved, really wasn't worth it. Among other things, he had to learn to play tennis with his left hand. He was still a hit with the ladies, though. He had a 'flat top' hairdo, as made famous by brat-pack film stars of the time such as Matt Dillon. If you had such a hairdo in the eighties you could get away with almost anything, including having a stump for a little finger and the IQ of a boiled potato.

This much I do know: I'm emotionally illiterate. For most of my life I have not been able to distinguish between a genuine romance and a load of old hooey. Give me a Glen

and a David to choose from and I'll go for nine-and-a-half-fingered Glen every time.

A friend who is into crystals and tarot readings once told me this is because I am self-sabotager and my moon is in Taurus. My friend Sally, who's into shopping and smoking Marlboro Lights, says it's because I'm a total idiot. I'm inclined to agree with Sally.

A few years after his proposal, David rang me out of the blue to tell me he was getting married. It only occurs to me now that he made that phone call as a last attempt to wave me down as I hurtled along the superhighway of romantic failure, giving me one last chance to take the turn-off marked 'Happiness'. But I just kept journeying intrepidly onwards, to a higher destination marked 'Freedom, fulfilment, independence and integrity'.

I can safely say, I am at that noble destination now. And so, with the benefit of hindsight and experience, I would say this to all independent-minded teenage girls with a richly diverse, challenging and fulfilling life ahead of them, who are weighing up a premature proposal from an eager young buck: girls, I beg of you, never, ever, turn down an early proposal. Get yourself hitched as young as possible, and then think about being richly diverse and challenging. You can't do it the other way round. Once you become richly diverse and challenging you will be about as attractive to men as a badger in a burka.

It wasn't all bad news for me, though. Fast forward nearly twenty years and I did manage to get myself engaged to a really nice guy called . . . let's call him Jim, for legal reasons.

We had been going out for five years, and one day I told him he had better buy me a ring because my mother was getting cross. How this was better than me just proposing myself I don't know.

I'm baffled by why it's so frowned on for women to propose. I once read an article on the right-wing website *Conservative Home*, in which a leading Tory implored women not to be foolish and propose to their menfolk. His thesis was that if a woman proposed to a man, he would resent her forever for emasculating him and taking something integral to his manhood away from him.

I don't think this can be right as it assumes that men actually like proposing. But men don't like proposing any more than they like emptying the dishwasher. No normal bloke wants to propose, any more than he wants to wipe the toilet seat, put the lid back on the toothpaste or swill the washing up suds out of the sink. As such, the choices are these: sit around all our lives waiting for them to spontaneously do it and like it (high risk, hardly ever pays off); force them to do it and hate it by getting ourselves pregnant or threatening to leave them for another man (almost always successful, though not high on the romance quotient); or do it ourselves (as yet totally untried and untested. I bet you any money if we did, a lot of men would be bloody relieved).

The worst thing about cancelling a wedding is not the vicarious excitement on the faces of your nearest and dearest, but the marketing chaos that ensues.

These wedding business people do not give up lightly. ‘Hello, Ms Kite,’ they say when they ring. ‘You asked for some information a few weeks ago about our vintage car hire service and we wondered if you had made your selection yet?’

‘Wedding’s off.’

‘Would you like us to send you more details?’

‘No thanks. I don’t need a wedding car. I’m not having a wedding.’

‘Was it the colour that was wrong?’

‘Nope. It’s just that I’m not getting married.’

‘Can I send you a brochure of our classic American vehicles? I’m sure there will be something in there that will meet your requirements.’

You see, everyone who has ever got married has used the line ‘the wedding’s off’ to stop the hundreds of companies they’ve contacted for estimates from hassling them. So the companies just don’t believe it. Consequently, I spent the months following my wedding cancellation, planning *not* having a wedding. Planning *not* having a wedding was in every way as complicated as having a wedding, if not more. The phone would ring and a chirpy female voice would say, ‘Hello, it’s Tina from That’s Entertainment here. You rang to ask about booking the eighties tribute band?’

‘Wedding’s off,’ I would say grumpily.

‘Yes, well, we just wondered whether you might be able to make a small deposit to secure the booking because Abba Kadabra are getting quite busy now.’

‘Really, I’m not getting married any more. I don’t need Abba Kadabra, or Yankee Goes to Bollywood, for that matter.’

‘If it’s a problem with the estimate we would be happy to negotiate . . .’

‘There’s no problem with the estimate. I’m just not getting married, that’s all.’

‘Or maybe you’d like to hear some other sample tapes?’

‘Look, I could book them, but they would have to come to my house and play in the kitchen because there is no wedding and I think spending £900 is a bit much for an evening’s entertainment for one person. I would really rather watch a DVD box set of *Boardwalk Empire* if it’s all the same to you.’

A few minutes later the phone would ring again.

‘Hello, it’s Mystique Gowns of Ripley here. We’ve noticed you cancelled your dress order last week and we were wondering when you wanted to come in and choose another one?’

‘I’m not getting married any more.’

‘So, did you want to come in tomorrow? About 3 p.m.?’

‘No, I want to come in never, because my life’s in ruins. I’m about to put my head in the oven.’

‘Actually we’ve got a fitting at three-thirty, so two would be better.’

‘Right, my head’s now in the oven. I’ve got to put the phone down so I can switch on the gas.’

And so on. The retail sector simply does not do off-the-peg

wedding cancellations. It's bespoke or nothing. You have to engage in the process every step of the way, and you can't take your eye off the ball for a minute.

If you ever do cancel your wedding, I suggest you retain the services of a wedding cancellation planner or else it will take over your entire life.

I had to work for two weeks cancelling the dress, and two months talking down the bridesmaids. One of them said, 'Oh but I loved that navy blue dress. Do you mean I can't have it now?'

I had to buy the outfit to pay her off, like a divorce settlement. But I drew the line at the velvet jacket. 'You can have the dress,' I said eventually, 'but the jacket's definitely out.' She was only involved in the preparations for three months. She went to two fittings. She was entitled to something, but she wasn't getting the bolero.

As for the fiancé, he took a cheque for the few bits of furniture in the flat that he had part paid for over the years and the computer he left in the spare room. But he refused to negotiate in any way about the fish tank.

'What do you mean you can't redecorate?' said my friend Sally as we sat in her kitchen eating one of her legendary salads.

'I can't redecorate. I've got a huge fish tank in my house.'

'Well, get rid of it,' she said, serving me another heap of lamb's lettuce, taleggio and asparagus.

'Why do they call it lamb's lettuce? Is it because lambs like

eating it? Or because it looks a bit like a lamb, or a bit of a lamb? And if so, which bit of the lamb?’

‘I don’t know. Why have you got a fish tank in your house?’

‘I can’t get rid of it. It was Jim’s. He left it when he moved out. He said he couldn’t be expected to take a fish tank to the tiny flat he was going to have to move to now that I had thrown him out and ruined his life and turned my back on him.’

Sally put her head on one side and raised her eyebrows as if to say, He’s got a point. ‘How big is this fish tank?’ A side helping of lentils, beetroot and feta was making its way on to my heaving plate.

‘It’s huge. It’s like a professional aquarium, like the ones you see in hotel lobbies. It takes up the entire length of one wall. I don’t even know how to clean it out. I think I’m probably meant to call a specialist company to come and do it.’

‘How many fish are in there?’

‘Two,’ I said through mouthfuls of cheese and leaves. ‘Have you put pomegranate seeds in this? It’s wrong, but somehow good.’

‘Two?’

‘Yes, two. We started off with more but the rest of them died. Now there’s just these two clownfish, golden and black things, like the ones in *Finding Nemo*.’

Sally gave me one of her looks. It was the look of a successfully married person, someone who had been living

in domestic harmony with her childhood sweetheart for thirty years. She and her husband Bobby had three teenage children and a big, rambling townhouse in Belgravia. Bobby was the nicest man in the world and one of Britain's leading classical actors. She was the daughter of one of the world's most revered film directors, which made her showbiz royalty. Together they were the most well-connected couple on the planet. Their children were funny and charming. Kitchen suppers around their table were a joy. There were always lots of people, their friends, their children, friends of the children – youth, laughter, life.

While I sat in my sad little kitchen in Balham, alone with my Waitrose ready-meal-for-one, and wrote columns about the fact that my clownfish was clinically obese, Sally ran a salon for fabulous people and wrote articles about beauty treatments for *Tatler* and *Vanity Fair*. Anyone could appear around her supper table, from Cheryl Cole to the Aga Khan. An impromptu dinner party arranged at the last minute would typically feature Elton John, Joan Collins, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Paddy Doherty from *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. Her guest lists were as wondrously eclectic and unexpected as the ingredients in her signature salads. And, against all odds, seemed to mix together just as well.

With children old enough to be doing their own thing while she was still only in her late forties, she looked forward to a glamorous period of empty nesting spent flinging together stars from the worlds of film, theatre, music

and trash TV in ways they had never been flung together before.

She also put a lot of displaced nurturing energy into playing the role of protective big sister to my dysfunctional single girl about town.

On nights when the children were all out and she didn't have a supper party featuring Kerry Katona and David Cameron, Bobby would go upstairs to the TV room with his dinner on a tray and leave Sally and me around the breakfast bar in the high raftered kitchen, as we were now, a huge bowl of salad in front of us and a Le Creuset pan of risotto on the range.

'I still don't understand why you can't get rid of the fish tank,' she said, grimacing. 'Gift it to a school or something.' Sally didn't give things, she gifted them. Gifting was like giving, only more classy.

'Because they're Jim's fish and they symbolize something. I want to fulfil my responsibilities to them. I feel guilty. I've ruined his life. I need to do right by his fish.'

Sally shook her head. 'They're just fish.'

But that was where she was wrong. At first I thought the same, but then I started watching them.

There was clearly a love affair between the big one and the little one, which I took to be male and female respectively. This love affair had blossomed gradually and had been all the more poignant because the male was clearly getting over his agoraphobia in order to be near her. He was a troubled soul and an overeater. This worried me because I'd had a fish

with an eating disorder before (the one who'd grown so big and moved so little he'd had to be mechanically extracted from his log after getting stuck in it). He'd pretty much lived in the log for three years, with his nose sticking out the end snaffling food. It was awful, just like one of those obese people who have to be lifted out of the window of their bedroom with a crane. The rescue operation took three hours, and he didn't make it, so before this happened again I decided to shoo the fat fish out of his log and find a bigger log he couldn't get stuck in. After days spent scouring the streets of London, it turned out there was an industry standard size for fish logs and that was that. I had to settle on a revolting-looking pirate ship. At first the fat fish looked at the pirate ship in horror. He hid in a corner as far away from it as he could get. He moped all day. He refused to eat. He lay flat on the pebbles pretending to be dead. When I looked in on him before bed, he was floating aimlessly as if life had lost all meaning. His partner was swimming in and out of the ship as if to assure him it was all right, but to no avail.

Then, the next morning, a miracle happened. I went into the study to read my emails, peered into the tank and a picture of aquatic domestic bliss greeted me: the two clownfish were lying on their sides in the pirate ship, one on top of the other, tails swishing, snoozing happily. A warm glow flooded my heart.

After a while he came out for longer periods and then he started to lose a tiny bit of weight. He was no longer

comfort eating all day and seemed to have found a reason to pull himself together. After being a loner in his log for years, he had found the strength to reach out. It was the power of love, I explained to Sally.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘I don’t know about fish falling in love, but I do know that you need a man. You can’t go on like this. How about Richard?’

Oh no, not Richard. Sally had lectured me long and hard about Richard and every time I broke up with someone, Richard was brandished like a wooden spoon. Richard was a rich minor-aristo type, nice enough, wildly uninteresting and, if you caught him between short stints with blonde actresses, endlessly available.

Bobby appeared with his empty plate. ‘Darling,’ he said, looking at me intensely, ‘you mustn’t let Sizzle fix you up with ghastly Richard. He really is the most dreadful oaf. I won’t allow it.’

‘But he’s perfect for her. He loves horses,’ said Sally, sparking up a Marlboro Light and exhaling philosophically.

‘Fuck horses, Sizzle. He’s a crashing bore. And have you seen the size of him lately? Really, darling, he’s perfectly hideous. Not nearly good enough for you, angel. Not even beginning to be good enough.’

As usual I had to explain to dear Bobby that I was in no position to worry about whether or not the crashing bore Richard was good enough for me. The harsh realities of late thirties dating meant that I had more chance of being run over by a bus than finding a man at my age, a statistic I was

fond of quoting, as if knowing the odds made them better. I knew absolutely no single men, unless you counted the handsome but rather strange neighbour a few doors down from me who walked his cats, Bismarck and Napoleon, and on the face of it he had to be, on some level, gay.

‘I’m getting on, you know,’ I said to Bobby. ‘Beggars can’t be choosers. And if he likes horses that may just be the clincher at this stage in the game.’

‘But darling, look at you. You’re gorgeous. You’re clever, beautiful, fantastically funny and witty and charming . . .’

Silently, a small part of me was thinking, ‘You’ve got a point, you know, I’m not half bad.’ Out loud I said, ‘But I need to find a man.’

Sally nodded. ‘It’s a fucking crisis, Bobby. She needs a husband. Richard’s single again. I’m going to invite him over for dinner.’

‘But I thought he was with that blonde actress, what’s her name, not Emilia Fox, the other one. Skinny as hell and mad as a March hare. Wasn’t she driving him crazy?’

‘They’ve split up,’ said Sally. ‘He won’t be on the market for long. He’s inherited the estate in Oxfordshire now. We need to move fast.’

‘Sienna Miller. No, not Sienna Miller, the other one. Oh, Sizzle, what’s her name? Blonde girl, skinny . . . Christ, I can’t think . . . Scarlett Johansson. No, not her, she’s American . . .’

Bobby spooned another heap of salad on to his plate, cut a doorstep of Daylesford *pain rustique* the size of the

Oxford English Dictionary and disappeared back upstairs muttering the names of blonde actresses.

The next week, I got my orders by text message to turn up at Sally and Bobby's for a kitchen supper with Richard: 'dinner thursday night at mine, us, you, and few others 8pm wear something bright do NOT wear black.'

I love black, but Sally always forbids it. She says only red makes men notice you because men are hopeless at noticing anything more subtle than the blindingly obvious. I don't know why women stop at wearing bright colours. If wearing red doesn't work you should simply go around with a huge sign saying, 'Look at me, I'm single and not fussy!'

A friend of mine who was having a spot of bother on the dating front once printed T-shirts bearing the slogan, 'Why not ask me to dinner?' She ran me off two, but to date I haven't had the nerve to wear them. By the time I'm desperate enough to put them on, I shall probably have bingo wings and the prospect of acting on their orders will be hardly less appetizing than if the T-shirts said, 'Why not take me to Gala?'

But I did as I was told because I didn't want to cross Sally. I turned up early for dinner wearing a bright red dress and a pair of vertiginous Louboutins and, as we waited for the rest of the guests to arrive, I chain-smoked my way through feelings of impending doom until I stank so much of smoke I could barely stand to be near myself.

I needn't have panicked. When the doorbell rang and he

walked in I was blown away. He was tall and dark, with a chiselled jaw and black piercing eyes. He had really, really good hair. Expensive hair. And a Cary Grant dimple in his chin.

He looked like Tom Ford's better looking brother. He was smoulderingly, devastatingly, nerve-shatteringly handsome. He was impeccably dressed, too, in just the right amount of Ralph Lauren. He was so suave he made John Hamm from *Mad Men* look grungy.

As he strode across the floor to greet me, the earth moved, the heavens opened and a chorus of angels began singing the greatest hits of Andrea Bocelli, but that may have been because Sally had just switched on the iPod dock.

He smiled the smile of a movie star in an old black and white movie, he gave me a look that said he already loved me because we were meant to be. He grabbed my hand with one of his big, handsome tanned hands. And when he pulled me close to mwah mwah me he inhaled deeply and declared, 'Mmm, cheap fags and Chanel. Very Catherine Deneuve.' Hallelujah! He got me! Oh, the ecstasy.

Then Sally pulled me into the kitchen and said, 'What are you doing? That's Simon Harper. The food writer. He's gay.'

I've had this before. Because I always fall for the really handsome ones, a lot of them turn out to be gay. But I'm not convinced (bear with me on this, it's not a homophobic statement, I assure you). 'We'll see about that,' I said to myself.

Sally had done a pitiless seating plan in which I was sandwiched between her and Richard, who was moping about

the canapés like an agoraphobic clownfish – the similarities were uncanny – so that there was no escape from what I was meant to be doing and so that she could kick me under the table every time I didn't say the right thing.

I managed to get out of it and wheedle myself a seat next to Simon.

We talked all night – no one could get a word in either of our directions. We only had eyes for each other. We even played kneesies under the table. Gay or not, he couldn't take his eyes off me. He wanted to know everything about me.

He was an award-winning food writer and nutritionist with a clinic in Knightsbridge and a long list of celebrity clients. We spent hours discussing food allergies and the new-fangled diets of the rich and famous. I couldn't remember when I'd been so happy with a man. We exchanged business cards and arranged to meet for breakfast at the Wolseley soon.

'You spent the whole night talking to Simon,' Sally chided me as we did the washing up afterwards.

'He's heaven.'

'He's gay.'

'He's so clever.'

'He's gay.'

'And funny . . .'

'And gay.'

'And sexy and glamorous.'

'And gay.'

'He'd make lovely babies.'

'He's gay.'

'He's so clever. Did I mention that? He's practically a doctor.'

'He's gay.'

'I'm sorry, are you trying to make a point?'

'Yes. And the point I'm trying to make is, he's gay.'

'Stop pigeon-holing him. Your definition of gay is so nineties. Gay men can fancy women now.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Gay men fall for straight women all the time nowadays. It's true. My gay friend Marcus told me about it. He's got this woman called Honoria he's totally in love with. Says he could quite happily marry her and spend the rest of his life with her. And he hangs out in the men's loos at Liverpool Street station on Saturday night, so don't tell me he's not a proper gay because he is. He's a proper gay who has fallen hopelessly in love with a woman. He loves her so much he says he would even be prepared to go without cottaging and picking up men on tube trains. It happens.'

'It so *doesn't* happen,' said Sally, lighting a Marlboro and opening up a copy of *Now* magazine.

'Simon and I are perfect for each other. He's just split up with his boyfriend. He's lonely. I'm lonely. What's not to like?'

'You're insane . . . Ohmygod, Madonna's got cellulite. Look.'

'And besides, with Simon I wouldn't have to do any of that wifey stuff. He would probably let me go on living in Balham. She hasn't got cellulite; it's just bad lighting.'

‘Well I should imagine so. I don’t suppose he would mind where you lived.’

‘Exactly. And he could have the children on weekends so I can ride my horse. It’s perfect.’

‘I suppose you could have a child with him. People do do that. It’s not the light.’

‘Oh yes, one of those designer IVF babies with a handsome, gay father. I’m going to ring him tomorrow and ask him. Or do you think it’s a bit soon after one dinner? It’s definitely the light, and the camera angle.’

‘What about Richard?’

‘He reminded me of my clownfish.’

‘That’s a start, isn’t it? Maybe you could tempt him out of his log. I’ll help you saw it in half. He’s probably wedged solid in it. It’s *not* the light. Look, there’s a patch. Oh hang on, maybe it is the light. Damn. What are you wearing to the do?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it yet.’

‘Well, think about it, baby. You need to start pushing the boat out if you’re going to find a man at your age.’

One of the really great things about being a nobody who writes a column is that you get invited to a lot of posh parties that no one would dream of inviting you to otherwise. The slightly less good thing is that no one apart from the person who has invited you knows who the hell you are.

You get out of your south London minicab, a battered Toyota driven by a traumatized Afghani who has just fallen

off the back of a lorry on the Eurostar, which you ask to park up a little way from the entrance, then hobble on your heels towards the barriers keeping back the crowds, where banks of paparazzi look you up and down as, to everyone's astonishment, you produce your invite and scuttle alone, unloved and unphotographed up the blasted red carpet. The banks of restive fans behind the barriers, eager for a glimpse of TomKat or Brangelina, suddenly go silent; you can hear a pin drop. They stare at you in steely silence. 'Who does she think she is?' they are thinking. 'She's nobody *and* she hasn't got a date!'

For this reason, and because we always seem to get the same invites, I always go to film premieres and awards ceremonies with Sally and Bobby. Being accompanied by someone famous makes going to places full of famous people a whole lot more bearable. Arriving at a red carpet event alone is excruciating.

Bobby was a genuine celebrity, not a fake modern one but an old-style one. He had been in movies directed by David Attenborough.

We would arrive together and, apart from a *frisson* of 'Who the hell is the one in the middle?' things usually passed off without incident.

Inside, I would stick close to my glamorous friends. Bobby would quickly find a director to talk to about the old times working with Dear Larry or Sir Alec, while Sally would start power-mingling with the glitziest celebs. This was a wonder to behold. She would spot Tom Hanks across a crowded

room and she'd be off. I would follow in her tailwind, then stand behind her as she chatted, slurping from my glass sheepishly until she turned round and asked me, 'Do you know Tom?' To which I would mumble, 'No, hello.' And he would look slightly confused and nod politely. They would then quickly go back to talking to each other and ignoring me and I would go back to slurping. And so on until Tom got pulled away and/or Sally spotted someone else, at which point we'd be off, scything through cocktail dresses like a rig speeding through a sea of catamarans at Cowes.

'Do you know Kylie?'

'No, hello.'

'Do you know Charlize?'

'No, hello.'

'Do you know Brad and Ange?'

Gulp. Spill drink. Tread on Ange's dress.

The amount of enormously impressive people I've said 'no, hello' to and who have then nodded vaguely in my general direction is a figure I would quote to my grandchildren – if I get my act together one day and have any.

When friends ask me if I've met any famous people lately I say I've nearly met loads. I couldn't tell you anything other than how short and thin they were in real life because I didn't get past the 'no hello nod' phase with any of them.

On this occasion, I was accompanying Sally and Bobby to the opening of a new restaurant by one of those chefs who do weird things with offal.

As we got out of our cab a little way from the entrance, a photographer from *Vanity Fair* spotted Bobby and chased after him along the street. ‘Bobby! Can I get a photo of you with your lovely wife?’

‘Of course, my dear boy,’ said Bobby, pulling Sally close. The photographer checked the light and made a huge fuss of getting exactly the right shot, taking frame after frame. Then Bobby grabbed me and pulled me into the shot proclaiming, ‘And now you must get a photo of me with both of these ravishing goddesses.’

The photographer shrugged irritably, held his camera in the air, pointed it vaguely in our general direction and clicked randomly without even looking into the viewfinder.

‘That was literally the most humiliating thing that has ever happened to me,’ I said, debating inwardly whether to burst into tears.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Sally vehemently. ‘The time you mistook Martin Scorsese for The Stig at the *GQ* Men of the Year awards was much more embarrassing.’

We had only just got inside the foyer of the hotel where the restaurant was when I caught sight of him. I recognized the perfect, close-cut back of his head, and the world went into slow motion as he turned and smiled.

Simon, in a tux. Simon, looking sexier than life itself. Simon, looking so good it was impossible to focus on him for longer than two seconds at a time because it hurt your eyes. Simon, with a young boy in shiny, tight trousers and a stupid haircut.

He came straight over to introduce me.

'This is Ricky Moon. *The* Ricky Moon, from reality TV show *Bow Belles*, about life in East London. He's the one who always wears clothes he can't afford by Dolce & Gabbana and spends three hours every morning doing his hair. He lives in a tower block.' Simon said this as if it were the crowning glory in the whole affair.

'I haven't seen it.' I looked Ricky up and down and curled my lip.

'Well, you're seeing me now! I'm even better in the flesh!' said the revolting specimen.

'He's going to be in the next series of *Celebrity Big Brother*,' said Simon, proudly putting an arm around his skinny little shoulders. 'He's even got his own catchphrase. Go on, say it . . .'

'RUDE!'

'I beg your pardon?'

'That's his catchphrase.'

'Charming.'

Later, when I spotted Simon on his own, I pulled him aside.

'What are you doing? He looks like his mother's knitted him.'

'*Au contraire, ma petite ray de misere*, he's the love of my life. I met him at the Sweat Club after I left Sally and Bobby's. Let go of my sleeve, you're pulling it out of shape. I've got to get back to him. I've left him talking to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He's probably solved the world debt crisis by now. He's such a clever boy.'

Grudgingly, I let go. The look on his face was enough. He really was in love. I felt murderously jealous. I couldn't go to my table. I could feel tears prickling my eyes. Any minute now my eyeliner would be making its way down my cheeks, scouring little winding rivers into my bronzer.

I dived into the loo, where I sat on the plush imitation Louis XIV-style loo furniture and wailed. It wasn't long before a considerate A-lister in Versace was trying to console me. 'What on earth is the matter?'

'He's . . . he's with someone else . . .'

'The bastard. Well, you look gorgeous tonight. I should think that will show him. Who are you wearing? Mouret?'

'Marks & Spencer.'

'Oh, well, it's very nice. You'd never know. Who is she?'

'He.'

'Dear me, that is tricky. But it happens to the best of us nowadays. Who is *he*?' I recognized her a bit. I think she was either Keira Knightley or Rachel Weisz. Then again, she could have been Natalie Portman.

'Ricky Moon,' I said, snivelling. 'They met at the Sweat Club. The Sweat Club! He doesn't sweat . . .'

Keira Weisz-Portman shrieked. 'Ricky Moon! Rude! Oh, he's dreamy. I'd give up now if I were you.'

I burst into tears again. It wasn't just the Simon situation. It was the whole me messing things up and embarrassing myself thing. Horrible memories of the Scorsese incident at the *GQ* awards came flooding back. A dark corner, a figure in silhouette that looked like he might be the fabled

Top Gear driver who, a friend had just confided to me, was lurking anonymously in that particular direction. 'You're a legend . . . It's such a thrill to finally see what you look like . . . What car do you drive? . . . I bet it's hot in that suit . . .' Oh, the horror. I could get a column out of these things, and it made the readers laugh, but one day I would just like *My Big Fat Single Life* not to be so hilarious for a change.