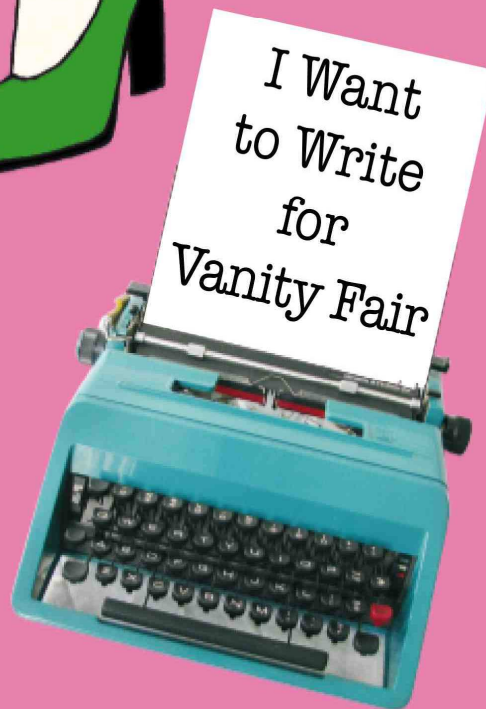
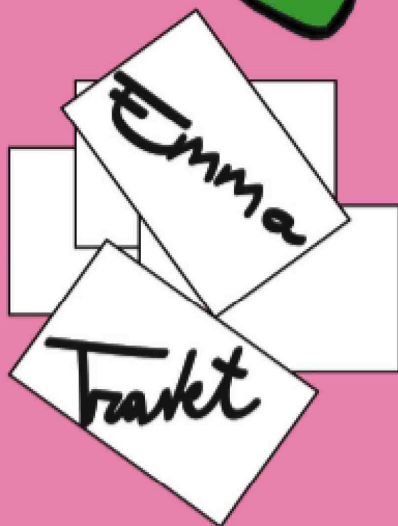
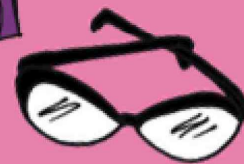


e-book



Illustration by Gabia Corazza



This book is a work of imagination.

Characters and quoted places are invention of the author and they have the purpose to confer truthfulness to the narration.

Any analogy with facts, places and people, is absolutely casual.

The marks quoted in the text refer to a precise stylistic choice and their use it doesn't dress again any positive or negative advertising value.

P.S. But my blog www.ericavagliengo.com and my web site www.emmatravet.com, are real.

Translated by Rossella E. Frigerio

to all my family

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 bolognaise 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 bolognaise 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 crème 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.