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LACE, CONFETTI & WEDDING FAVORS

That night I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking of Niccolò and my embarrassing performance. I kept seeing him gently touching Anna's neck. I thought how lonely I was. The sense of failure was overwhelming. I didn't even exact a decent revenge!

I stared at my alarm clock, counting the hours I'd been awake. I was pondering how strange love is – it seems so difficult but it's simpler than we think. Actually, it's not rocket science. Love comes when we least expect it – like coming upon a wildflower in a field. Suddenly we are elated. Love is an intimate emotion and it grows at a different pace and intensity for everyone. When it's reciprocated, it's a miracle. It fills us, our bodies, our minds. Love gives deeper meaning to our days, to our lives. But when it's not returned, or is denied, love becomes a painful, crushing burden.

I didn't sleep at all. The next morning, I got out of bed with puffy eyes and a headache. I made coffee very slowly, looking out of the window. An important day was ahead and I had to forget about my anxiety and love obsession.

I showered and then went to my closet to choose what to wear. Every time I start a new job, I feel nervous, anxious, but also excited – like the first day of school.

My closet offered a wide range of choices: sheath dresses, suits, trousers of all styles, jackets, striped t-shirts, hats, cashmere sweaters, skirts, and shirts that I hated to press and always sent to the dry cleaner.

I didn't buy anything new for that day, but so what? As Coco Chanel once said: *Elegance does not mean putting on a new dress*. I was convinced I could still look great without wearing something new.

I selected a light grey sheath dress with round neckline and paired it with cap toe black and white shoes, in perfect Chanel style. Last touch: six strings of pearls around my neck.

I put just a little make-up on – only to cover the circles under my eyes – and finally a few drops of *Chanel No 5*, my precious talisman.

I looked at myself in the mirror and felt satisfied: professional, good-looking and elegant.

I put on my funky sunglasses, grabbed my Marni handbag – one of my favourites, but it was always so heavy, filled with so much stuff! I left my apartment, anxious and with a slight stomach ache.

That morning in the subway I couldn't help but notice many young couples apparently in love, squeezed among sleepy commuters. Their caresses, whispers and holding hands got on my nerves. So corny! There should be a law to forbid couples to kiss and cuddle in public places. Who ever said that all humanity has to witness and enjoy other people's love making?

When I arrived at my office building – way too early – I stopped at the café below to have a cappuccino. I sat near the window to watch what kind of people entered. Then I picked up my courage and entered. My new colleagues all seemed young and hip. They wore casual but trendy clothes, most of them had smart phone ear buds, and they smiled a lot at one other saying good morning.

I had an appointment with the agency's director and wasn't sure where to go. While trying to figure out the office floor plan, I saw the guy who had saved me from that embarrassing fall just a few days before. He wore a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up and looked so sexy. He carried a huge box that he probably had to deliver to someone working in the building. He must have been an errand boy. The most handsome errand boy I had ever seen.

He approached me with his perfect smile and sparkling eyes: "Nice to see you again... happy to see you are now able to stand!"

I felt like an idiot. I wished a trap door would open below me and make me disappear forever.

"Hmm... I'm doing my best to keep my balance," I said, trying to be funny.

He kept staring at me and I went back to look at the office map on the wall to escape his blue eyes, while I felt my cheeks blushing.

“Are you lost?” He asked kindly, coming closer to me. He smelled good.

“Yes... It’s my first day here and I don’t know where all the offices are yet. I have an appointment with Mr Parisi. Do you know where his office is?”

“Sure! Second floor, second door on your left. I’m going in the same direction,” he said, pointing towards the elevator. His accent was very elegant. French, I thought.

The elevator stopped at our floor and he gallantly invited me to enter first. I tried to make some kind of small talk to overcome the embarrassment. “You must have an interesting job...”

He looked at me with perplexity.

“Well, I mean, delivering packages all around Milan... I’m sure you must meet a lot of people,” I realized how ridiculous I sounded.

In fact, he laughed: “Oh, *oui*. It’s really a beautiful job. One gets to meet many interesting people.”

“Are the packages you carry really heavy?” (Congratulations Coco! Very intelligent question.)

“I deliver any kind of packages: large, small, huge, heavy and light,” he smiled and kept staring at me with his magnetic look.

Finally, we arrived at the second floor and he led me to the director’s office.

“You are really pretty when you walk without stumbling,” he caught me by surprise and I blushed up to my ears.

“Thank you... Believe me, I usually don’t fall into the arms of strangers.” I said staring down at my feet to avoid his gaze.

He knocked lightly on Mr Parisi's door, but didn't wait for an answer to enter. "*C'est moi!*"

I was right – he was French!

"Come in," a young voice said. They seem to know each other very well.

I expected the typical, predictable boss: a distinguished man in his fifties, with a navy suit, a boring tie, and elegant shoes. On the contrary, on the other side of the desk I saw a smiling young man about my age, wearing jeans and a *Clash* t-shirt.

"I brought the documents you were looking for," the errand boy said confidently, "and then I found a new hire on the elevator."

Both of them smiled warmly at me.

"You must be our new resource from Venice," he said, inviting me to sit.

"My name is Rebecca Bruni."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Rebecca. If you don't mind, we can be informal..."

"Sure," I always felt a little uncomfortable using a formal tone with people my age.

"Thank you, Etienne," he addressed the man who had just placed the box on his desk.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone now," he said heading to the door. "Hope to meet you again, Rebecca – maybe in the elevator." His look was full of irony.

I smiled shyly at him. As soon as he left, Paolo looked at me for a moment and said: "So you have worked at *One* for about five years, organizing scientific-medical conventions."

"Correct."

"All positions are filled in our conventions division, but, as we discussed with the Venice agency, there are other positions open."

“Yes, I’ve been informed of this. I would like to try working at different kinds of events.”

“Good! I like people who love change. Your new position will be in a division that we only recently opened, and we’re very excited about it and proud of it. Your work will be organizing wedding receptions.”

Weddings! It must have been a big misunderstanding. I didn’t know anything about weddings! I knew only that they were very expensive and boring parties, organized in historical villas with little gravel paths that ruined my heels, where I always met relatives that I hated meeting, who always asked me: “And you, Rebecca? When will you marry?” I had never liked weddings and now – single with a broken heart – I liked them even less. I didn’t think I was the right person to help some corny couples in love realize their dream.

“Weddings?” I asked with a puzzled tone. “I thought, hoped, you would have assigned me to organize fashion events, boutique openings, art gallery exhibitions...”

“At the moment all other positions are filled. We really need new creative people for our new exciting adventure: the weddings division.”

The more I thought about it, the more I realized it wasn’t the right work for me. I could do any kind of thing, even organize dogs’ beauty contests, but not weddings. No way. I detested brides, sugary music, wedding cakes full of calories and lace and chiffon dresses. But most of all, I didn’t want to work in the name of love. I hated love.

“Listen, Paolo... May I call you Paolo?”

“Sure, Rebecca,”

“I’m sorry but I don’t think I’m the right person for organizing weddings events. I never married and my parents divorced when I was a kid. I don’t think I have any feeling for wedding parties. In addition, I am single.”

“Don’t worry Rebecca, at the beginning you’ll be led through the process by a colleague who will explain everything you need to know: music, cakes, wedding rings, white doves and flowers. She will train you until you are ready to be on your own. We’ll make you the best wedding planner on the scene.”

He smiled and stood up to signal that our conversation was finished. So I had to organize wedding receptions. In fact, I would become the best wedding planner in Italy, more, in the entire world! I felt a slight sense of vertigo.

Paolo led me to the door and explained where the office was of the person who would introduce me to the joys of weddings. He shook my hand: “Welcome Rebecca. *Every day will be an event.*” He quoted the ad that made the agency famous.

The little bit of enthusiasm I had found to face my first day at work began to abandon me. But I decided to find the courage to hold on, at least until the end of the day.

I took the elevator to the fifth floor. I checked myself in the mirror and didn’t like what I saw.

When I got to the wedding planning department, I asked for Valentina De Bois. I quickly counted five people. A short girl, with very tight jeans and a navy silk shirt – which revealed her generous cleavage – walked towards me. She also had on a pair of faux leopard boots with heels so high I couldn’t figure out how she could walk. But she seemed very comfortable, as if wearing slippers. Her skin was the colour of mahogany – tanning spray or tanning bed? I wondered. Her fake smile didn’t promise anything good. I immediately felt she was about as nice as a hammer smashing your toes!

“Valentina. You must be Rebecca,” she extended her hand with long turquoise polished nails.

“Yes, Rebecca Bruni. Nice to meet you.”

“Your sheath dress is nice... how shall I say? So out-of-date... Is it vintage?”

“Well, someone used to say, *fashion passes, style remains*,” I said definitely irritated.

“It’s not what my Dolce & Gabbana jeans would say...”

Ok, she was a bitch! I should ignore her provocation.

“Your desk is that one, on the corner. As you know, we plan wedding receptions. Our ad says, *we will transform your most important day into a unique event*. In short, we are working for hysterical brides and very rich grooms.”

Well, said this way, the whole deal sounded even more exciting! I had to restrain myself from jumping for joy.

“We organize everything: the selection of dresses, wedding rings, location, catering, flowers, cars, even the type of confetti. We offer a complete service and we are the best. Do you understand? The best,” she said with pride. “And *I* co-ordinate everything!” Humility evidently wasn’t her best skill.

I went to my desk without a word and turned on the computer. I began to look at the documents that someone had put in a file called *Rebecca*. There were miscellaneous items: photographs of events, budgets, quotes, the history of the company, and a document stating the agency’s *mission*. I spent most of the morning going over these documents, then I took a break and went to the coffee vending machine. There I met two girls who seemed nice. They smiled and introduced themselves. Marika and Sara worked in marketing. When they learned that Valentina was my tutor, they laughed, wishing me *good luck*!

As I was finishing my watery cappuccino, Etienne approached me with an amused smile.

“So... Rebecca.”

“Yes... Etienne.” I extended my hand for a formal introduction. He shook it, still smiling.

“How is your morning going so far?” He selected an espresso from the vending machine.

“Well, I’m trying to settle in... It’s too early to say, new colleagues, the wedding thing and Valentina...”

“She’s a tough nut, right?”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes, I’ve met her a few times... for some deliveries.”

“I wonder why bosses hire people with that kind of attitude... They should know immediately what kind of person they are going to get! Don’t you think? A boss’s task should be to create teams that also function from the human perspective... Ok, sorry for the tirade. I sometimes think that managers are a little dull. They should know better.”

He winked. “Come on! Chill out... First days are always the most difficult, but you’ll see, eventually it will be fun.”

Well, with errand boys like you – I thought – maybe it *will be fun*. “Thank you! I’ll survive.”

He tossed his cup in the trash can and turned towards me. “Beautiful pearls!” Then he left.

I stood there watching him walk away, then I looked down and saw an envelope. I picked it up. It was addressed to him with elegant hand writing. I thought of calling him back, but he had already disappeared. And now? I felt the impulse to open it, but I couldn’t go against all my principles just because of a blue-eyed beautiful guy. I would keep it until our next encounter. It could be a good excuse to talk again. I turned to go back to my very, very *simpatica* Valentina.

When I got back to my office she was at my desk, touching my hand bag I’d thrown on the chair.

“Very soft leather,” she said.

“Yes, I bought it in an outlet near Venice. It was a wonderful bargain!”

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you move to Milan? It was for a man, right?”

Her disregard for my privacy got on my nerves. “No, I moved to Milan to grow professionally.”

“Sure! Maybe you even have the ambition to become a CEO...” She laughed out loud. “Are you sure you didn’t move here for some handsome Milanese?”

I couldn’t understand why this tasteless woman had to put me through this inquisition about my personal life. If she weren’t my boss, I would have sent her to hell without a second thought.

“No, I’m single.”

“Single in Milan? Competition is tough here...” she said sarcastically.

Why didn’t she mind her own business? “Well, I thought Milan would be a good place to start over...”

“Everything is clear now! You thought that in the big city you would find more prey to have fun! I can imagine how many guys you’ll conquer with your little grandma dresses...”

I was ready to throw the whole computer at her little blonde head. “I don’t want to find *prey to have fun*,” my voice was rising “I simply want to grow professionally, meet new friends – and why not? – one day maybe find a guy with whom to share all this. Is that enough for you?” I was going to lose my temper. I felt angry and hurt, but to start crying in front of my new colleagues on my first day of work would not have been a good start.

“Oh, you are so romantic! Love, Love, Love.”

I didn’t understand why she kept provoking me. I couldn’t see her objective. Did she want to make a fool of me in front of everybody so I would run away? Undermine my already fragile self-confidence to show she was powerful? I tried to breathe and calm myself.

Now she was saying, “You really are a naïve provincial girl. Do you think you’ll find your Prince Charming? Men are all assholes. You don’t know how many grooms I find – organizing weddings – who want to take me to bed!”

“Well, good. I see, a wedding planner who sacrifices herself for the cause! May I go back to work now?” I had to end that painful conversation.

“Yes, that’s why you’re here, honey.” Fuck you – I thought. “You can start to study these...” she added, pointing to some fat files. Then she moved on to harass someone else.

While trying to focus on the boring files, I remembered Etienne’s letter. I was extremely curious. I noticed it was open... Could I give at least a quick glance? I was conflicted. Maybe it was something very important and I had to return it as soon as possible. I was ready to put it back, when the light letter slipped out. It was written in French, my second language. Destiny had chosen for me. I had to read it. Two lines were enough to understand that it was a declaration of love. It ended with, *do you want to marry me, Etienne? Yours, Juliette.*

I was embarrassed. My young blue-eyed man was engaged! Maybe he was going to marry soon. I felt a strange sensation, as if I were somehow involved. Why did I feel that I needed to do something about it? Why did I think I knew Etienne’s answer? I couldn’t stop thinking of those passionate words. I had a weird feeling and felt my heart in my throat.

At that point the bitch came back to my desk. “Do you think we pay you to attend to your own business?”

I blushed, feeling guilty. “Sorry... I’ll go back to work right now.”

“Listen darling, I don’t know what you were used to in your humid, wet, provincial town, but here we work seriously. If I tell you to do something, you must do it and right away!” She stared at me with small, evil eyes etched with crow’s feet. Then she returned to her desk and I couldn’t help sticking out my tongue at her back as she walked away.

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I needed to hear a friendly voice and tell someone about this ironic turn my life was taking. I called Emma.

“Hi, do you have a few minutes?”

“Hi Coco! How is it going?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about something. They assigned me to organize weddings!”

“What?” Emma started laughing. “I can’t see you organizing wedding receptions! Did you tell them about your performance at my cousin’s wedding?”

“When I stumbled into the table where the five-layered cake was placed and it fell on the floor? I don’t think it’s funny.”

“You should have told your boss! It was an incredibly funny scene. My Australian relatives still remember it. In every e-mail they send me, they always ask me about you.”

“See, I’m a disaster. How can I be a wedding planner?”

“Coco, I think you are taking it too seriously. It’s just work! Perhaps your *karma* is saying something to you. Helping other women to organize their dream day might help you to believe in love again.”

“Speaking of love, I did a horrible thing... Emma, I read a letter addressed to another person.”

“You? *Miss Privacy is sacred?*”

“Umm, yes. It was by chance... There is this very handsome guy who works as the errand boy and his letter fell into my hands... I didn’t want to read it! Believe me...”

“Sure, I suppose so...”

“It was a love letter. So straightforward and passionate. I never would have the courage to say or write something like this to a man.”

“I know, because you lack self-confidence.”

“It’s true. I would like to learn how to be more confident, less worried about everything. Is there a secret for this?”

“Yes! Just live in the present. Take what life gives and try to relax!”

I adored Emma. She was always able to cheer me up... and she was often right, like this time. Yes, what did I have to lose? I lived in Milan, had a job in a prestigious agency and had a wonderful friend. I was lucky and I should repeat this to myself every day. I needed to trust myself in spite of Niccolò, Anna, Valentina and whomever future *bad guy* I might stumble upon...

“Thank you Emma. Love you.”

“Love you too, Coco. Remember I will always be here for you.”

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It was lunch time, but I wasn’t hungry at all. I couldn’t swallow a peanut! I decided to have a pineapple juice and just walk around the nearby neighbourhood. The city was full of people rushing, cars racing by, crowds waiting at bus stops, young people in line at counters in bars just to get a quick sandwich. It was so different from the relaxed Venetian pace.

While I was walking back to the office, I noticed an old couple sitting on a bench. He caressed her hand, while his wife smiled and talked animatedly. I stopped to look at them for a moment. They were beautiful. They looked like two adolescents. I wondered how long they had been together. I felt touched, and the tears I had to hold back all morning, gushed out. This was the kind of love I was looking for and maybe I would never find. I dried my eyes with a handkerchief and entered the office building. I went straight to the bathroom to fix my make-up and thought of Niccolò. What would he have thought seeing me like this? He, who imagined that I was so strong and determined? Then I realized I really had to stop thinking about him. Stop

asking myself what he would think or what he would say... I had to forget him, cancel all thoughts of him. He loved another woman; never loved me. Let's move on, Coco!

I needed to stop looking back at my disastrous past, stop obsessively analyzing my faults. I wanted to look ahead. If my *karma* was testing me, I wouldn't give up. Was it asking me to organize wedding receptions? Well, I was ready for it. I will become the queen of wedding planners! I had cried enough. It was time to stop. Furthermore, crying makes you wrinkled and I couldn't afford it. *Nature gives you the face you have at twenty; it is up to you to merit the face you have at fifty.* Another Mademoiselle Coco truth, and I wanted to get to fifty, beautiful and self-accomplished. I will make it.

4

MY SHEATH DRESS

My first weeks at work were frantic and exhausting. I was shocked by the quantity of things I had to learn. I thought that a few basics were enough: a beautiful off-white dress (pure white is out of date), two white gold wedding rings (yellow gold is out of date too), a little old church in the countryside (pastoral style is very chic) and a restaurant, that actually is not really a restaurant. The reception must be on a lake, or a Caribbean beach, or on the roof top of a palace (the more it's a *non-restaurant*, the better). But most of all, we needed a groom who wouldn't flee on the morning of the wedding!

I was in my training phase and I carefully followed all the instructions of my tutor, the *very nice* Valentina, who didn't miss a chance to let me know how slow, lazy, unprepared, etcetera, I was. I had been assigned to a reception for about fifty guests, in a small villa near Milan, and I was trying to do my best.

When I got home in the evening, I was wiped out, with a migraine and my stomach in knots.

Once in a while, I knocked on Claudio's door to have a beer with him and talk before dinner. We were both still looking for *the great love*. While I was giving up, he continued to hope. He believed in destiny and knew that the woman he was looking for would come, sooner or later. He didn't rush. Sometimes, when he felt especially lonely, he found consolation in the arms of the occasional lover. Instead, I was still convinced that in losing Niccolò I had lost the best and only chance of love in my life. I struggled to believe something new and beautiful would ever happen again to me.

When Claudio pushed me to make an effort, to introduce myself, to flirt with some nice guy, I always found them uninteresting: too imperfect, too boring, too ugly or too stupid. Perhaps it was too early to jump into a new relationship.

One evening we were drinking at a bar, and had invited Emma to join us. We'd already had our second glass of wine, when a guy approached our table and asked me if we had met before somewhere. He was handsome, with dark hair, and wore trendy glasses. I didn't think I had met him before, but Emma insisted on inviting him to our table. He was very kind and offered us another glass of wine (my third on an empty stomach!). His name was Marco; he was a dentist. Finally, we discovered that we had met before at a medical convention organized by my Venice agency. He remembered how I dressed and told me he liked my style. I felt gratified: I knew that following Coco Chanel's advice wasn't a mistake.

We chatted all evening, ordering more wine and also food – most of all so I wouldn't pass out! Marco was nice, brilliant and sweet. He showered me with compliments and – I confess – I didn't dislike it.

Emma and Claudio, seeing me so relaxed, found an excuse to leave us alone, and suddenly they disappeared. I hadn't felt so carefree in ages, and so kept talking to Marco for a couple of hours. Then we decided to take a walk. It was a beautiful and warm evening; the neighbourhood of Porta Romana was filled with people strolling.

We walked with no particular destination, talking about our lives. Nothing too deep. He told me about some of his funnier patients, of their terror of opening their mouths, of the smiles of toothless little children that made him cheerful. I talked about my new job, about that time I ruined Emma's cousin's wedding party, my habit of reading my horoscope and that of the people I know, and even about my shoe collection. It was relaxing to walk and talk with a stranger who didn't know anything about me. I forgot my sleepless nights and my tears.

Near the old Spanish wall that surrounds Milan, Marco gently placed his hands on my hips, pulled me closer, and kissed me. I was lost in that kiss, and found myself lightly biting a stranger's lips in the middle of a warm Milanese night.

I wanted to be happy again, beautiful and courted. So I closed my eyes and we continued to kiss, until he whispered in my ear, "your place?"

I looked into his eyes, trying to establish whether I really wanted to make love to him. I had suffered so much for a man – maybe now I should take more time in the dating phase before giving myself to the next man. I wanted to be desired, I wanted sex to be more than just a workout to burn off the cocktail calories.

“I’m sorry, Marco, but I think this is all happening too fast.”

“I understand, but it’s your fault: you’re so beautiful and sexy. I can’t resist you!” It was a well-known and dated strategy, but always effective.

“Thank you for the compliment, but I have just gotten out of a difficult year-long relationship. I need time. I think I wouldn’t feel at ease if we went to bed together tonight.”

“Yes, I completely understand, but believe me, I would do everything to make you feel comfortable. I like you. I like the way you move, your lightness, and I feel you like me too. Why not take this night to enjoy each other as a gift?

Maybe he was right. I should let myself go. I was a woman in my thirties, not a kid, and I lived in a big city: what kept me from having some healthy sex with a nice guy I just met? Why not?

“Uhhh... we could...”

“Fantastic!” he said, embracing me and kissing on the neck, “also because I’m not sure when I will have another night of freedom.”

“Why?”

“My wife is on vacation with the kids at my in-laws’ house on the lake. An entire night for myself doesn’t happen often – believe me!”

He had a wife. And here he was messing around Milan, shameless, looking for *Miss Goodbar*!

“Oh – so you are married?”

“Yes.”

“And your wedding ring?”

“Ah... I took it off to play tennis. I must have left it in my bag... It’s not a problem, right?”

He talked as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Of course it was a problem! Why couldn’t I find a man available for me and *only* for me? The man I had almost married betrayed me with a fat *whale*! And then the man I loved preferred a younger blonde skinny girl to me. Now, my first prospective lover in Milan was married with children. I was tired of always being the woman filling in the cracks. I was tired of being the second choice, the woman of last resort. I wanted to be number one!

“In fact,” I said slowly, pulling myself away from him, “it *is* a problem, a big problem. What made you think that I wanted to start a relationship with a married man?”

“A *relationship*! Hey, wait a minute... What made *you* think that I was interested in a relationship? You are a pretty woman and I enjoyed my time with you... That’s all! I only wanted to have a fun night with you...”

I was disgusted. Yes, men are all assholes. The bitch Valentina was absolutely right. I just wanted to go home. Alone.

“Rather than having a *fun night* with you, I would prefer sitting on my couch waiting for the menopause! Look for somebody else. Goodnight!”

“I didn’t think you were so prudish, especially at your age!”

Ok, just because a single woman is thirty something should she stop being selective? Shouldn’t she grab every chance? So, do I have to sleep with all the men in Milan, married or not? Fuck! I looked at him, outraged, and headed home. It was incredible how many morons there were in Milan.

After a few seconds, I heard his sarcastic, “Goodbye Rebecca!”

As soon as I got home, I took off my Chanel shoes and threw myself on the sofa. I was furious!

I wondered if the dentist’s wife ever used sweet and passionate words with him, like those in Etienne’s letter. Well, she didn’t have great luck with a husband like that! I drank a couple of glasses of water, washed my face and went to bed. At least tomorrow morning I would have something interesting to tell my two friends.

The next day I arrived at the office with a horrible hangover. I had tried to feel better by drinking litres and litres of coffee, but it didn’t work. When I checked my computer, I immediately found an e-mail from Emma asking in a funny tone how my romantic adventure had ended. I quickly answered her, and her reaction was only one word: *bastard!*

I was happy to see she agreed with me. After all, maybe I wasn’t such a prude!

Valentina came over to my desk to hand me some documents. I yawned. She stared at me and said, “Is Her Majesty with us today or is she still dreaming in her silk sheets?”

“Sorry, I’m a little tired today.”

“Did our sweet *Snow White* stay up late last night?”

“Yes, I think I had too much wine...” I said, and immediately regretted my words.

“How was he?” The bitch had her usual sarcastic tone.

“What made you think that there was a *he*?”

Her disregard for privacy was pathological.

“There is always a man when a woman drinks too much wine... So? A new flirt?”

“No, there isn’t any new flirt. I just had a dinner with friends...”

“Such a bore! Last night I met a new guy on *Tinder*. Are you on *Tinder*? You definitively must join! Maybe even *you* could find someone! He was very sexy and we had a fabulous night. Too bad this morning he had to run back to his fiancée!” She started laughing out loud.

I should have asked the married dentist for his telephone number and given it to her. They would be the perfect couple!

“The other evening,” she continued, not even realizing I couldn’t be less interested, “I went out with a guy you would have loved. He’s very skinny with vintage clothes. I thought you two might have several things in common. Why don’t you check his profile?” She smiled.

“Thank you for trying to help, but at the moment I’m fine...” I had no intention of signing on with a match-making website, and didn’t care for meeting someone online.

“As you wish, but sooner or later you should relax. You can’t keep acting like a *little nun* forever! Sex is good for work, it stimulates creativity. It’s for this reason that I’m the most brilliant person in the entire office!” She laughed again.

After these words, Valentina rose to the top of the list of people I hated most. She surpasses even the *whale*!

She finally left, and I thought about what happened to me the night before. I was realizing that having a busy sex life had become absolutely normal, both for singles and couples. Being faithful wasn’t considered an important aspect in a relationship any more. Apparently what kept people from betraying their partners was never the thought of hurting them. On the contrary – maybe I’m out of date on this too! – but I believe in monogamy. I don’t mean in an absolute sense – I feel it is impossible and maybe not too realistic to have only one man for your whole life – but in a relative sense, yes. I like the idea of being unique for my partner. And I never thought of betraying my partner simply because I didn’t feel the desire to. Sexual fidelity had never been an issue for me. It is somehow in my nature. For the whole year I saw Niccolò, I never thought of another man, even during the long weekends I spent without him. Now, after our break-up, I often wonder how many other women he saw when we weren’t together. I never

asked him: on one hand because I somehow trusted he felt like I did. On the other hand, because I couldn't pretend fidelity, since I never had the courage to express my feelings. And – as we know – if there are no feelings, there's no being faithful.

I knew I had a different attitude towards sex than most people my age. Let's take Marco – the asshole last night – as an example. If he had decided to betray his wife, it wasn't my problem. I could have not cared about it. I didn't know his wife and didn't have any obligation to her. Yet, I didn't feel it was right. Perhaps I am loyal to all women... well – to be honest – not exactly *all* women.

Perhaps this is my limitation: I am only able to love exclusively, I am not capable of compromising. But I like to think there is something original and genuine in my attitude towards sex and relationships. In fact, as my heroine and role model was one of the most nonconformist women of the last century, I shouldn't be afraid of feeling differently, but proud of it. I shouldn't try to be a conformist. Actually, feeling a *little revolutionary* made me feel better. I will not become cynical and will keep dreaming big. I will remain the romantic I am, in spite of everything. I smelled Chanel No 5 through the pashmina scarf I had around my neck, and went back to work.

During my lunch break Claudio called me. He too was curious to know how my night with the dentist had ended. Claudio had become a very close friend. I never had such a deep friendship before with a heterosexual male. Almost always physical attraction, and sometimes a sense of possession, made friendships with men complicated. On the contrary, it had been easy and natural with Claudio. We were two loyal good friends – nothing more. I knew he found me attractive, but there wasn't any sexual chemistry between us, and this had allowed us to be true friends. Just a few days before, he quoted the end of *Casablanca*, one of his favourite films: *Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship*. I felt deeply moved.

I needed a friend like him in Milan, otherwise Emma would tell me to go to hell one day. They both shared the burden. Me.

Over the phone, the first thing he laughingly asked me was, “did you score last night?”

I laughed too. “No, the dentist was married!”

“... and he even remembered he was married when he began to flirt with you!”

“He didn’t think it was a problem.”

“Was it a problem for you?” Claudio asked.

“I think so... I thought about it and decided that I deserve a lover without the burden of a family.”

“I understand. You don’t know how many times I suffered because I got involved with married women!”

“I can’t understand how people can so easily keep love and sex separated. Even when there is passion.”

“Coco, I’m afraid that we are the odd ones. These days passion and feelings are two completely different things. I have met several married people – men and women – who have several affairs while at the same time they claim to deeply love their legitimate partners.”

“I would be devoured by a sense of guilt!”

“Because you’re a romantic.”

“Let me be clear. In my past I’ve had some *sex & rock roll only affairs*; yet if someone I could love appeared, I stopped fooling around.”

“Ah, ah, ah! So no sex for the poor dentist last night?”

“I don’t know, Claudio... Honestly, I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go to bed with him. Are you convinced too that the only way to forget someone is to make love to the first person you meet?”

“The truth is, Coco, that there isn’t the right answer for everybody. Some people can forget their old love by only falling in love with someone else. For others it’s easier, and they can soothe their pain with sex, *Sexual Healing*. Some people just need time. However, time helps us to feel better. Maybe it’s still early for you to jump into a new relationship, or perhaps you’re only waiting for the right person. Who knows?”

“Frankly, I hoped someone could show me the way!”

“I get it! This won’t console you, but I am telling you that many have experienced a broken heart. Suffering for love is one of the most painful things that can happen in life. And it’s always as if it were the first time. We are always unprepared. Love knocks you off your feet, then it’s gone as if nothing happened. And we, silly human beings, are helpless before the power of love. We can only surrender.”

“Do you think this torment will pass sooner or later?”

“Yes! I promise. And when it’s finally over, we’ll celebrate. But remember, on that day I will forbid you to drink on an empty stomach – you become *dangerous*...” His laugh made me laugh. He was right. I should lighten up.

“I have to grab some lunch now. Do you want to have a beer tonight?”

“Tonight I have dinner with my favourite colleague. Let’s talk tomorrow.”

“Ok. Have a good evening!”

I went to the café to order my usual cheese and ham toast and sparkling water, then I took a walk.

Walking relaxed me. Sometimes I took the subway to discover new places, secret parts of Milan that made me feel at home. I found new interesting showrooms, little Chinese markets, eccentric nails spas and pretty boutiques. Wandering around made me feel as if I were still in

Venice, although I didn't hear that special sound of gondolas gliding in the water. I missed that terribly.

On the way back to the office, I decided I would go shopping later that afternoon. I had lived in Milan for weeks now and hadn't done any serious shopping yet. Shame on me! It was time to use my credit card.

When I got out of the subway in via Manzoni it was almost seven. I headed towards Armani and then I took via Montenapoleone, the temple of fashion, and sped up; I really wanted to buy something before the stores closed.

I've always been fascinated by fashion. It's a world full of creativity, elegance and beauty. It helps us dream. I've never been a fashion victim who spends all their salary on designer clothes. I have my own style and look for clothes that fit my personality. Clothes, like women, must be unique. Coco Chanel said that *fashion is made to become unfashionable*. Every season it changes, re-invents itself. Yet there are the timeless pieces: the sheath dress (my beloved uniform – I even bought one in a sale at *Maison Chanel* in London!), tailored suits, black pants, cashmere sweaters and trench coats.

I passed by the windows of Versace, Prada, Valentino, Etro and Gucci. Then I entered a small outlet that had fantastic bargains. I couldn't resist. I looked around to see what would be right for me, something understated, but not too classic. I carefully avoided faux animal prints, skirts too short and leather, and began to look at dresses. Predictably, I picked up a beautiful sheath dress by Dolce & Gabbana and decided to try it on. In the fitting room I put it on and realized it was a little too big for me. Was it possible? I asked the salesgirl for advice and, after looking at me for a moment, she went back to bring the same dress in a smaller size. I felt my heart in my throat: was I really fitting into something that small? Slowly I tried it on, I pulled the zipper up and – a miracle! – it worked. And even without holding my breath. I was very excited. I couldn't believe that love, unrequited love, had done the miracle. I had lost a lot of weight!

I took the dress off, handed to the girl, almost shouting, "I'll take it!!"

Honestly I never thought that this would happen: Rebecca Bruni fitting into that size. It was front page news! I was so happy that I didn't care about the price. I grabbed my shopping bag and proudly walked out into the warm Milanese evening.

In front of the Gucci window, while walking fast, I stumbled into someone. His bags and mine fell on the ground. I bent down to pick them up, apologizing for being so clumsy. And – oh my god! – when I looked up I saw those unmistakable blue eyes.

“Will we be able to meet one day without falling down or dropping something?” Etienne laughed, taking back his shopping bags.

“Please, excuse me. I always have my head in the clouds...”

I noticed he had done some shopping at Versace and Gucci, and that he wore Armani jeans. I didn't know errand boys had such big salaries!

“A new dress?” he asked looking at my bag.

“Well, yes. I needed it...” I answered, still excited about my new dress size!

“I adore shopping in Milan, it's the ideal city for it.” Then he added, “Do you have time for a coffee?”

It wasn't really coffee time, but I wanted to accept. I also thought of his letter, that I still had in my hand bag, but I was too embarrassed to give it back to him at that moment.

We went into a very elegant bar and ordered two espressos.

“I love Italian coffee. In Paris I have an Italian moka pot, and use it every morning.”

“So, are you from Paris? Do you go back often?” I began to feel very curious about this man.

“Every time I can.” I heard a slight teasing tone in his voice.

“Do you have relatives there?” I couldn’t confess that I had read his letter and knew he had a passionate fiancée.

He looked at me, perplexed. “I have my family there.”

Ok. He didn’t want to talk about Juliette. It was his business and of course I wanted to respect his privacy. At least this time!

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

I was taken aback. He was very straightforward!

“No, I’m taking a course to learn how to be independent!” I tried to be funny. I couldn’t confess to this fascinating man that I had been rejected by all the men I had met.

“I like independent women.” His smile was so charming that I started to feel butterflies in my stomach.

We got out of the bar and kept walking and chatting. It was pleasant. We were in via Sant’Andrea and I stopped to look at the Chanel boutique window. The collection was faithful to Coco’s original spirit: black and white dominated, and there were long strings of pearls round the mannequins necks.

“I adore Chanel,” I confessed, while he was looking at the window with interest. “In Venice I had an aunt who wore only Chanel. She had been educated in a boarding school where all the teachers were dressed in severe little black dresses. She got so fascinated by this look that for the rest of her life she bought only Chanel clothes. She always had six strings of pearls round her neck and smoked long, thin cigarettes. I was her only niece and, when I was a kid, she let me try on all her beautiful dresses, tweed jackets with golden buttons and elegant knee-length skirts. She gave me the nickname, Coco. She died a few years ago. All her things went to an auction house. She was in debt because she had always lived beyond her means. Yet before dying, she gave me an important gift: her vintage Chanel 2.55 handbag. I still have it as a keepsake.”

“It’s a beautiful story. So, may I call you Coco?”

I smiled, blushing. He could call me any name he wanted with that warm, sensual voice!

“Since you know Chanel so well, do you mind being my personal shopper? I have to buy a gift for my mother and I’m still undecided. I leave for Paris tomorrow. We are having a birthday dinner for her that evening.”

“Are you sure? I think Chanel prices are pretty crazy...”

Having a small budget for my clothes, I never really went into a Chanel boutique. I only looked in the windows.

He laughed. “I have some savings...”

“Perfect!” I was excited. I was going to shop in the boutique of my dreams.

We looked around the store: classic tailored suits, black and white sheath dresses and incredible evening gowns.

“That is you...” he said, while I was holding up a little black dress in front of me and looking in the mirror.

“Thank you. That’s a great compliment.”

“Somehow you seem to come from another era. You remind me of my mother and her girlfriends in vintage black and white photographs.”

Shit! Was he telling me I looked old?

“Well, that’s not something a woman usually wants to hear...”

“Oh no! I’m sorry. I meant to say that you have a timeless charm.” He was sweet and kind, and I kept blushing.

Then we started to look at accessories: beautiful pins shaped like camellias, elegant leather gloves and wonderful hats.

“How do I look?” I asked, wearing a small black bowler hat.

“Wonderful! You look like Charlie Chaplin!”

“Umm... Right! It’s not for me.”

“You’re funny, Coco.” Hearing him saying my name gave me goose bumps. I liked it.

“Madame... Sir, we are about to close.” A lady in a white and navy suit invited us to hurry. And we still had to find the gift! I glanced at an off-white handbag with golden accents and it caught my attention. I touched it. The leather was very soft. “What do you think of this for your mom?” Etienne came closer for a look. “Not sure how much you want to spend... it’s expensive.” For sure *I* couldn’t afford it.

“For my mother I spare no expense!” He gave the handbag to the sales person together with his credit card. His mother was a lucky woman!

We both left the store satisfied.

“Thank you for helping me. Without you it would have been difficult to decide...”

“Thank you for giving me an excuse to go inside a Chanel boutique.”

We parted and he walked towards the subway. “See you soon, Coco!”

I waved to him, hoping I had convinced him that I’m not totally clumsy.

*

Smiling to myself, I kept walking to San Babila, then up to the Duomo and from there along Corso di Porta Romana until I reached home.

It had been really a nice afternoon. I had bought a new dress and shopped at Chanel. For several hours I had forgotten about the dentist, Valentina, my job – still struggling with it – and of course Niccolò. I was proud of myself, the new me I dreamed about. Now I had to work on my own sense of identity, taking all the time I needed to feel strong, self-confident, even without a man. What did I lack to feel independent? Maybe just some courage.

Coco Chanel had fallen many times, but she always got back on her feet. It was because she believed in her talent and she had a dream. She had also borrowed money from her lovers, without shame, and she always returned the money to them down to the last penny!

I should stop feeling incomplete without a man, stop feeling guilty. I wasn't a silly little princess waiting for her Prince Charming. I was a determined woman, wearing a very small dress size, with an interesting job. I had everything I needed. I just had to believe it.

As soon as I got home, I waved to Mrs Leoncini, the funny lady who lived on the first floor. As usual, she was watering her plants on the balcony. When I entered my apartment, I celebrated my little victories with a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and a piece of chocolate that I had hidden – in case of emergency – behind my wall of shoe boxes. At times I don't need much to feel happy.