

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Fashion Babylon

Imogen Edwards-Jones & Anonymous

About the Book

What is fashion? Who decides what's in and what's out? Is the catwalk really that catty? Is everyone high on drugs and full of champagne? What makes a supermodel so super?

Exquisitely cut and gorgeously detailed, *Fashion Babylon* takes you through six months in a designer's life. It explains how the fashion business works - the mark-ups and the come-downs, the fabulous extremes and the shoddy short-cuts. Find out who goes to the shows, where they sit and whose backside they have to kiss to get there.

Whether you just like a bit of shopping or you're a hardcore fashionista, *Fashion Babylon* will change the way you sashay into Topshop, flick through the pages of Vogue and worship at the temple of Harvey Nichols for ever!

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Also by Imogen Edwards-Jones

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& Anonymous



CORGI BOOKS

For Allegra

With very grateful thanks to the wonderful Eugenie Furniss and the handsome Doug Young and all at Transworld for their fabulousness.

And to all the people whose time and patience I called upon during the hours and days I spent interviewing them in wine bars, restaurants, private clubs and the insane sweaty confines of backstage during various fashion weeks; I am extremely thankful as I could not have done this without your humour, trust and kind co-operation.

Prologue

All of the following is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty. All the anecdotes, the stories, the highs, the lows, the scams, the drugs, the deals, the rivalries and the insanity are as told to me by Anonymous - a wide and varied collection of people who all work at the heart of the fashion industry. The designer is fictionalized; however, the incidents are real, the celebrities play themselves, but the stories now all take place within six months of a designer's year. Narrated by Anonymous, all the stories have been condensed into this time period. But everything else is as it should be. The rich buy the clothes, the poor make them, and everyone else thrives on the heady and rarefied atmosphere. It's just another six months in the life of the fashion industry.

1

TODAY IS THE morning after the night before, and if I look closely at Alexander's upturned nose I can see that both his nostrils are frosted like a margarita glass. He's been at the jazz. But then we all have. It's the end of another long and exhausting London Fashion Week; how else are we all supposed to remain funny and fabulous without a couple of grams of Bolivia's finest in our Chloé leather Paddington bags?

Not that we are this morning. Lying flat on his back, fully clothed, clutching an empty bottle of Grey Goose vodka tightly to his chest, Alexander looks like he is barely capable of speech let alone an amusing anecdote or witty quip. And I couldn't feel less fabulous. It was my sixth runway show last night, and lying here, staring at the ceiling of this overpriced hotel suite which we booked ourselves into to carry on the after-show party, I can't help thinking things might not be going my way.

It won't be anything to do with the show. I mean, considering my lack of financial backing, all the time constraints and the fact that two of my stitchers walked out at the last minute, my collection wasn't actually that bad. I'd really gone to town with my tailoring skills. Well, that is my signature. I'm known for my cut. I love it. You can take pounds off people with a well-placed seam. My jackets were tight and short, my skirts skimmed the hips and pinched in the waist, my trousers were wide legged and my shirts had leg-of-mutton sleeves. I'd gone for a nautical theme, with stripes and sailor's hats. Lots of white. I think there was

one killer white and silver dress in the show. I was actually quite pleased with the way that it all turned out. It arrived on time and in the right order. I didn't have a moment like one designer did, whose collection, entirely of navy blue, fell off the hangers and all he was left with was a pile of crumpled blue clothes and no idea as to which order to put them in. He apparently then sat on the catwalk and burst into tears saying that he would never design again. But my clothes did arrive. As did the models. A couple were late and a few more were a little worse for wear. They'd been at the champagne early but they were still capable of walking in a straight line; those who weren't had a line to straighten them up. Even the famously flatulent model who guffs her way up and down the runway managed to put a cork in it for my show. Perhaps she'd laid off the beans in my honour. So the smiles were genuine. Even if some were a little rictus. However, on the whole I thought it went well. Everyone made it there and back. No-one keeled over like Naomi Campbell in her heels, the fash pack flocked backstage to pat and preen and pretend, and we all tucked into the booze after the show.

No, the real problem is that my last two shows were deemed hits by the press. Particularly my last Fall collection. Christ, even Anna Wintour liked it. Not that she saw it, of course. She doesn't really do London. We're too small, unimportant and lacking in advertising funds to warrant a visit from Nuclear. She does deign to descend on London Fashion Week occasionally. She is rumoured to be coming next season, but she is always rumoured to be turning up, on her way to Milan and Paris. Much like Madonna is always supposed to be coming to premières and London fashion parties, so La Wintour is always anticipated and fêted and never shows. It was, therefore, one of the worker bees from US *Vogue* who turned up to my last show. Anyway it was deemed hot and happening, on the button, fashion forward enough to have a whole corner

of a page in US *Vogue*. They even included a couple of my blouses and a trapeze coat in the roundups. *Elle* magazine ran a feature. *Marie Claire* asked for an interview. *Harpers* did a shoot. The *Evening Standard* gave me a double-page spread, suggesting that I might be the new Roland Mouret. A hack from the *Telegraph* came to my after-show party. Even Style.com couldn't summon the energy to slag me off. In fact they were nice. Everyone was nice. Which is a dangerous thing in fashion.

A lot was expected of last night's show, and I'm not sure I could ever have delivered. The British Fashion Council were kind enough to give me the slot I requested, 6.30 p.m. on Thursday, which is a first. Every year they ask me which slot I would like, every year I ask for Thursday evening, and every year they give me Tuesday at 9.30 a.m. No-one wants to go at the beginning of the week, as it means none of the US buyers have made it across the Pond after the close of New York. And no-one can face a morning show. Who wants a glass of champagne before they've managed to get a skinny latte down their necks? But this year I was given the best slot, on the best day; I was even scheduled next to Betty Jackson, so everyone could come. My front row was full, my back row was full. I also had a sniff of celeb - an Appleton, that girl from *The X Factor*. There was even talk of Posh, but Alexander stamped his foot. Not that she would show up anyway. But he was certain to make sure.

'She is all tan, tits and hair extensions,' he pronounced at the mere mention that her people might be calling my person for a front-row ticket. 'And to me quite frankly she just isn't fashion.'

'Cavalli is all over her,' I replied.

'Purlease,' he said. 'That old arse. I reckon he's got as much style as a remainder bin.'

Alexander has lots of grapevine stories that frankly I think are untrue, and he launched into one of his old favourites. A few years back when Tom Ford was still at

Gucci, he allegedly called up his PR in London demanding to get 'that woman' out of his clothes. The PR is supposed to have said she couldn't as Posh was buying their clothes. And Ford is said to have paused and then shouted, *'How can we stop her?'*

'So, if Posh is not good enough for Tom Ford,' Alexander continued with a shrug, 'we don't want her skinny arse anywhere near our collection.'

Now, Alexander starts to cough himself awake next to me. It is one of those hacking coughs where you can hear lumps and lungs curdling together. The bed is shaking. Finally there is one loud hack as he sits up, releasing the vodka bottle which rolls off the bed onto the heavily carpeted floor.

'Oh, fuck!' he says, opening his eyes, rubbing his pale face and running his hands through his slick mousey hair. 'I feel shit.' He coughs again. 'You got a ciggie?'

'Umm,' I say, looking out into the room.

I have slept with Alexander twice a year, every year, ever since we got together some time in the last century, and I have to say he isn't any more charming in the morning.

'Jesus,' he says, rubbing his small nose as he surveys the scene. 'What the fuck happened to this place? It's trashed.'

He's not wrong. There are glasses and bottles and fag butts everywhere. There are half-drunk drinks, butts in half-drunk drinks, and one smeared CD case in the middle of the table. Someone's been wearing the complimentary dressing gown. It's lying by the door. The free slippers are out of their plastic, and someone's left a white and gold handbag behind.

'Oh I say,' says Alexander, carefully getting out of bed, holding onto his head. Dressed in his black suit and white shirt he looks like a magpie on a mission as he gingerly picks his way through the debris in his black silk socks. 'Look at this. This looks quite nice,' he says, picking up the bag and sniffing the leather. 'A possible party steal?'

'It looks like a Tanner Krolle to me,' I say, sitting up in bed.

'Oh, you're right,' he says, dropping it straight back onto the floor. 'Suddenly I'm liking that a whole lot less.'

He sits down on one of the two grey felt sofas and starts going through the empty packets on the table until he finds a cigarette. He sparks it up and inhales. He dissolves into a fit of coughing which culminates in a loud snorting of phlegm, which he swallows.

'God,' he says. 'That's much better. Oh, look,' he adds, cheering up no end. 'Look what we have here. My Selfridges card.' He smiles, holding it up for me to see. 'With my name written in coke.' He taps the card out onto the CD packet and gathers together the remainder of the drugs into a thin line. He searches the table and then eventually in his own suit pockets for some money. He finds one squalid-looking fiver, which he rejects in favour of a taxi receipt. He rolls it up. It's poised by his nostril when he suddenly remembers his middle-class manners and private education. 'Want some?' he asks.

'No thanks.'

'Righty-ho.' He smiles before he snorts the CD clean. 'OK,' he says, clapping his hands together and rubbing the sweat down the front of his Dior trousers. 'How are you feeling?'

'Not terribly confident,' I reply.

Actually, that's a bit of an understatement. I feel sick, scared and deeply unconfident. This has to be the worst moment in any fashion designer's year. You've worked your arse off. You've done your best. Had no sleep for weeks. Nothing to eat or drink other than Haribo sweets and full-fat Coke for days. Yet this ordeal is nothing compared to the reviews. They can make you or crucify you in one morning. They can close your business. Make sure no-one places any orders. Wipe the floor with you. And send you back to fashion ignominy with one swift slip of the pen.

My heart is racing, my mouth is dry, and I can barely breathe. I have had two good shows and one great season. I'm sure they are all queuing up to knock me down. That's the thing about the London shows: they only really like you if you are really new, really young and really really poor. They like to discover you and give you your first break. They love it if someone like Isabella Blow swoops in and buys your entire collection. Or if Kate Moss walks off in all your clothes. But if you are already doing OK, chugging along nicely with a rack in Harvey Nichols and some Matches orders under your belt, then they have nothing to write about. There's no story. They are looking for the next fashion forward freak with Perspex frocks and feather knickers to put on their front page. If you have been around the block once and collected your British Fashion Award for Best Newcomer, like I did last year, then there is nowhere to go. Except down.

'Do you want me to go and get the reviews?' asks Alexander. 'Or shall we go together?'

'I need some air. Can we go to some internet café around the corner?' I suggest. 'I need to see what Style.com has said before anyone else. After all, that's the one that is going to be beamed all around the world.'

'OK. Squeeze yourself into your skirt and let's get cracking.' He looks at his knock-off watch which he bought on a beach in Sardinia. 'It's gone ten.'

Fifteen minutes and £438 worth of hotel bill later we are walking through Soho looking for a café. It's early September and the weather is gloriously sunny and the sky is bright and clear. Alexander hides his hangover behind a pair of retro shades. He looks a little odd in his black Dior suit and Gucci shoes. Most of the street is still doing the tail end of spring/summer wearing drippy boho skirts, coin belts and gypsy tops; yet he has already moved on. Although I suppose I can talk. I'm in a tight grey pencil

skirt and tight-fitting shirt that went down so well in the Fall show back in February.

Just off Wardour Street we find a small café that does coffee and buns and is full of foreign students checking their email.

'We're not far from the office, why don't we go there?' says Alexander, looking around the place, curling his top lip slightly. He doesn't enjoy mixing with real people.

'I'd rather do it now,' I say. 'Before we get back to the office and the phone starts going.'

'OK.' He nods. 'You sit down, I'll get the coffees. D'you want the usual?'

'Thanks.' I smile. I must be the only one left in fashion still to have full-fat milk in their latte.

Alexander slips off towards the back of the café and I go online. In the seconds it takes for Style.com to appear on the screen, all I want to do is throw up. Vodka, coke, stress and three hours' sleep in as many days is enough to make anyone want to hurl all over their keyboard. And then suddenly there it is. The site comes up. I type in my name; a photo of the flatulent model comes on screen. She is swinging towards the lens in a sharp white skirt and sleeveless shirt with a large white collar. I inhale and start to read the copy. 'There is only one way to sum up what went on last night: it was dull. For a designer that we had all hoped was about to hit her stride with her sharp looks and excellent tailoring skills this really did not hit the spot. While you would have to applaud the effort and imagination that went into the collection, the execution was just not cutting edge enough. I had hoped to be blown away by the talent and the ideas that have always abounded in her clothes, but the dresses were too derivative, the trousers were just not daring enough ...' And it goes on and on. My ideas are not interesting enough, the styling is heavy-handed, my shoes are clunky and ugly. It ends: 'Let's hope

this is just a seasonal glitch.' I stare at the review in disbelief. Shit shit shit.

'Oh dear,' says Alexander, inhaling sharply through the back of his teeth. He is leaning over my shoulder reading along with me. He sits down, putting the two mugs of coffee on the table. 'Well, we could always tap into the tranny shoe market.'

'What?' I say, in a daze.

'Like Vivienne,' he continues.

'Westwood?'

'Of course.' He rolls his eyes. 'Her shoes sell like hot cakes in the States.' He smiles. 'But only in enormous men's sizes. They go down a storm in the tranny clubs of West Hollywood.'

'Well, by the look of things and this bloody Louise bitch, I'll only be dressing trannies by the end of today.'

'They're very discerning,' he replies.

'They are?'

'Absolutely.' He smiles again. 'Honestly, don't worry about Style.com.' He takes an enormous slurp of his coffee. 'Who reads it?'

'Only everyone.'

I slump forward, pick up a teaspoon and start stirring my coffee. I sigh. My whole world is collapsing. The business I have spent nearly six years building up is going to go under. Like so many other British fashion designers before me, I am going to arrive with a bang and leave with a whole load of CCJs and bad bloody debts.

'Do you want some chocolate on that?'

'Please.'

Alexander really does know me very well. He is my friend, my inspiration and my partner. Business not sexual, obviously. We met eight years ago in a pub in Soho. He was a graphic design graduate with a dodgy third-class degree in his pocket and I was not so fresh from Central St Martin's. I had been styling a *Face* magazine shoot and had

a few frock designs pencilled on a postcard, and he said he had a mate with a spare room/studio off Berwick Street. We drank some lager, smoked four packets of Marlboro Lights and discovered a mutual love for tailoring. We obsessed about Hussein Chalayan's wooden skirt, gossiped about Vivienne Westwood and shared our Sunday afternoon fixation with the Victoria and Albert Museum. Suddenly it was dawn. And we have been together ever since.

He is brilliant at all the things I hate. He is great with figures, good with people in the business. He walks the walk and talks for bloody England. He butters up the right folk, gets us deals left and right, and actually enjoys talking to all those frosty females who seem to run the world of fashion. He has only ever really fucked up once, when a couple of seasons ago he tried to reinvent the front row of our show. We had a large white space and he decided we would make the thing very democratic. We made the runway extra long and wound it around the place, placing chairs all the way along it, thereby making every seat on the front row. No-one liked it, not one little bit. Editors were jostling with fashion directors who were shouting at assistants who were arguing with students. No-one knew their place. No-one could work out which was the better seat or who had the better view. You should never underestimate the egos of these people. Vivienne Westwood's people once made the mistake of handing out more tickets than there were seats for a Paris show. It ended in a riot.

'Here you go,' says Alexander, returning with a latte heaving with chocolate powder.

'Thanks,' I say, taking a teaspoon, scooping up the powder and shoving the whole lot in my mouth. 'I suppose the next port of call is Suzy Menkes.'

An institution in her own right, Suzy Menkes has been writing for the *International Herald Tribune* ever since fashion was invented. A bit boho around the edges, she has

a signature curl-fronted hairdo and is one of the best writers around. Known for her fairness, accuracy and love of fashion, a good review from her could turn the whole sorry collection around.

'She won't be out till tomorrow,' says Alexander. 'Or even the day after that.'

'Just the UK media then,' I say, taking another teaspoon of chocolate.

Alexander nods.

'Well ... our life is over.'

'Maybe not,' he says, rubbing his hands together. 'There's always the *Telegraph*. The *Telegraph* likes you.'

'Yeah, but we need *The Times*, the *Standard*, I need ... oh God ... the *Sunday Times*.'

Alexander and I look at each other and start to laugh. It is not happy laughter. It is hysterical and hung over and resigned.

'They are never going to give you that,' giggles Alexander. 'They've never liked anything you've ever done. Ever!'

'I know.'

'They've been rude about you even when everyone else liked the collection.'

'I know.'

'And now you're hoping that they might come through for you this time.'

'I know!'

My voice is so high and strained and loud that the foreign students are beginning to look at us like we're insane. Which I suppose we are.

'Let's get back to the office,' says Alexander. 'Before we make total tits of ourselves.'

Back in the office next to a bookie's off Berwick Street and it looks like we've been burgled. There is stuff strewn every way. Each and every one of the three floors of the building has been trashed. The ground floor where we have

a semblance of a reception area with a desk and purple velvet sofa plus a large fitting room to the right with racks and racks of clothes is covered in paper and patterns and tiny bits of off-cut material. There are buttons and trim and pads of pins and needles on every surface. There are single shoes and piles of bracelets and necklaces lying all over the dark pink carpet. Next floor up, where I have my desk plus mood wall and Alexander has his office, is slightly tidier. But there are still rolls of fabric and discarded toiles all over the place. The floor above, where the pattern cutters and seamstresses work, looks like a sequin-stuffed mattress has exploded in it. There are hardly any sequins in my collection, in fact there are only two evening dresses trimmed with the things, yet the whole of the top floor is covered with them. There are also great swathes of silver silk everywhere - remnants of the silver parka jackets I had suddenly decided to make after seeing something rather similar in the Marc Jacobs show the week before.

One of the perks of following New York is that you get to see what all the other designers are doing. It is always worth looking at Marc Jacobs, Anna Sui, Michael Kors, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren and Tuleh, and getting the occasional glimpse of Oscar Pay My Renta, as the girls call him, just to make sure that we are on message. As a small company it is important to get a few items that are similar to what the fash pack are hailing as the trends for the season - a Russian-inspired skirt here, an Edwardian-meets-modern-looking shirt there, a sharp jacket, a silver coat. If everyone else is going red and you're the only one insisting on turquoise then you won't make the pages and pages of round-ups at the end of the season. Those 'essential things for summer/autumn/winter' sections that grace the front pages of the glossies are bread and butter to us new kids on the block.

So three days ago, after seeing something silver and sexy swishing down Marc's catwalk, I sent Trish, our

seventeen-year-old work experience student, out down Berwick Street market to get yards of the shiny grey stuff to make up some coats. Alexander barked that she should not come back until she'd found it, and he wanted receipts.

I always feel a bit sorry for Trish, but Alexander says I shouldn't. She gets her train fare in from somewhere way out east, wherever she lives, and £10-a-day expenses. I have no idea what she actually lives on, but I suspect it is Haribos and atmosphere like the rest of us in fashion. Whatever it is, she looks very thin and very good on it. She's always got the latest pair of Chanel sunglasses or a Balenciaga belt that her friends have pinched from the fashion cupboards of the various magazines they work for. The rest of her stuff is usually of her own creation teamed with a T from Top Shop, or something similar.

Anyway, she did eventually return - after, I suspect, fifteen fags and a few coffees in the local caff around the corner - and then all hell broke loose. There was much Portuguese and Polish shouting and screaming from my stitchers, and some surly sighing and Japanese attitude from my pattern cutters, but after a night of smoking, swearing and downing copious cans of Red Bull, they produced three half-decent-looking silvery silk anorak coats with large hoods and pale pink linings. They never made it into the show in the end. My stylist Mimi said she wasn't feeling them, and that was that.

Actually, standing here, gagging slightly from the smell of the old, dank fag smoke that curls down the stairs from the sewing room, I can see one of the coats hanging up on the back of my chair in the office. It looks rather nice, soft and light and strangely elegant. Maybe I should have put them in my collection after all? Or perhaps I'd better just flog them off in the sample sale at the end of the month?

'Hiya,' comes a voice from the bottom of the stairs.

'Hello there, Trish,' replies Alexander.

'Hi, Alex ... ander,' she says.

'You're learning.'

'I've got the papers,' she says.

'You're in early,' I say, coming down the stairs.

'I slept here.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah.' She nods towards the purple sofa in the reception area. 'Missed the night bus home. A mate suggested I come and sleep with them over in Southwark but I thought I'd save myself the effort and come and kip down here. That pink fun fur coat from last season is ever so warm.'

'You slept in something from last season?' jokes Alexander.

'I know.' She giggles. 'Ma-jor! It was a toss-up between freezing my tits off or making a fashion faux pas, and I thought no-one would know.'

Dressed in a pair of homemade dark grey, high-waisted trousers and black T-shirt with large white Chanel glasses perched on her head, Trish isn't really joking. She would genuinely rather freeze than wear last season. I smile. The girl will probably go far.

'Have you looked at the reviews yet?' I ask her.

'None of the others have got theirs in yet. But I've had a little look at the *Standard*.'

'And?'

'It's not too bad.' She shrugs her shoulders. 'They picked out a few things they like.'

'A few?' says Alexander, sounding deeply dubious.

'Shall I read you a bit?' asks Trish.

'Go on,' I say. I can feel my hands beginning to sweat as she opens up the paper.

'It's on page three?' asks Alexander.

'Yeah,' she replies with a nod.

'That's good,' he says to me.

'OK?' asks Trish.

Alexander and I both nod.

‘Blah blah blah,’ she starts. ‘I’m just skipping the boring bit ... “Having said all that, if you take away the stiff creations she has managed to put together a very wearable collection that will no doubt please the fashion-conscious career woman.”’

‘Wearable?’ says Alexander.

‘Yeah,’ says Trish, her mouth hanging open slightly.

‘You don’t want a collection that is bloody *wearable*. Jesus Christ,’ he says, slumping down on the purple sofa. ‘Wearable ... Is that all she can come up with? Fucking wearable?’ He is doing the quotation-marks-in-the-air thing. ‘Next she’ll be saying that our skirts are “pleasant” and our trousers are fucking “nice”. Wearable,’ he huffs. ‘No-one wants to be fucking “wearable” in fashion.’

‘Yeah,’ agrees Trish, wrinkling up her nose. ‘That’s almost as bad as being commercial.’

‘Well, no, actually,’ says Alexander.

‘Really?’ says Trish. ‘But everyone hates commercial.’

‘Can I have a look at that?’ I ask, walking towards her.

‘Sure,’ she says, handing over the paper.

I open it to page three and nearly drop the thing.

‘Oh God,’ I say, folding it back and showing it to Alexander. ‘Have you seen this?’

‘“Ted Nicholls Reclaims His Fashion Crown”,’ reads Alexander. ‘Fuck. That’s all we bloody need.’

‘You’re the small piece underneath that,’ adds Trish, helpfully.

‘Yes, thanks, I can see that,’ I say.

‘That twat’s back from the dead,’ says Alexander. ‘How the hell did that happen?’

2

OVER THE NEXT couple of days the rest of the reviews come in. They are mostly negative, mostly uninspiring and mostly all saying the same thing - that my bubble has burst, that I'm a busted flush and that I'm no longer cutting edge. I have to say that I am a little depressed that six months' hard work can be dismissed so easily. Actually, Suzy Menkes was good. God bless her. She talked about my turning a corner and being a little bit more experimental. She liked the stiff skirts and tight shirts. But by then it was all a bit too late. The other broadsheets were dismissive. The *Telegraph* wrote a lot of description, which is what they do when they don't really like something that much. We're still waiting for the *Sunday Times*, but it doesn't really matter what they say. The damage has been done. The collection is not going to be a critical hit.

Alexander is being brilliant about it all. He hasn't stopped chain smoking and pacing between our two offices. He is high as a kite on Fair Trade espressos and spitting feathers that Ted Nicholls is apparently having some sort of comeback. 'It's only because the stupid queen went bust that they love him now,' he says, pacing and coughing and tugging at his bottom lip. 'Bloody play gay. If he'd been successful and had then produced that show they wouldn't have written so many nice things. He was successful, then he failed, and now they love him again. It is so typical. Wouldn't it be great if the fashion world suddenly surprised you?'

Ted Nicholls and I were at St Martin's together. We were in the same year and were lovers for a while. We planned to start a label together when we left college, but then he dumped me, decided that he was gay and moved in with the hardcore Hoxton fashion crowd. He now worships at the altar of Katie Grand, so I don't really see much of him any more. Katie's a bit too cool for school and she wouldn't let someone like me in her gang. Actually, if I am being honest, she has never and would never even speak to me. She's never put any of my clothes in her zeitgeist-embracing fashion magazine, *Pop*. In fact, I would hazard a guess that she would rather die than wear any of my clobber.

And anyway, her court is rather full these days. Lee McQueen, Roland Mouret, Giles Deacon, Luella Bartley, the performance artist Johnny Woo, the DJ Richard Batty and the new head of Mulberry, Stuart Vevers, are all her mates. I know Ted drinks at the George and Dragon on the Hackney Road and spent a lot of time last summer hanging out at Golf Sale, a special fashion club night in a place on Hoxton Square. Sam Taylor Wood used to DJ there, along with a bloke called Gregory Wilkins, and they all knocked back the VLSs (vodka, lime and sodas) and sambuca shots while getting down to some groovy tunes. Kate Moss turned up a few times and even threatened to DJ once, but she never did.

One or two of the liggers and nobodies in that crowd are jazz mad - and I don't mean the music. So I have to say that I wasn't surprised when the last time I bumped into Ted it was on a hot Monday morning in the middle of June and he was sporting a straw fedora and a flip-flop and hadn't been to bed. He'd been to an illegal drinking den off Old Street - some bloke's penthouse flat where you pay for your drinks. He had a terrible summer cold, was chewing his own cheeks off, and was dragging some heavily pierced specimen in his wake.

‘Darling!’ he exclaimed. ‘How the hell are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ I remember saying, pretending very hard not to give a shit.

‘Vince,’ he said, gesturing to the pierced person, ‘this is the only woman I have ever shagged.’

I smiled. They both looked me up and down and then burst out laughing.

So you can imagine how pleased I am to see him back on the scene and doing so well. Unfortunately for Ted, Golf Sale has closed down. Its popularity had extended to real people, so it was killed off. I have no idea where he hangs out these days. I imagine he is still trying to befriend Samantha Morton at Sunday Social in Islington or frothing up Sadie Frost in the Engineer in Primrose Hill. Ted’s a sucker for the famous and will go to almost any lengths to get a celeb in his frocks. He’s not quite at the Julien Macdonald and Kelly Brook level, but he is not far off.

Alexander and I don’t really have time to dwell on the resurgence of Ted Nicholls’s marvellousness, much as it would pain him to hear it. We have a long list of sales meetings to deal with before we pack up the collection and take it over to Paris.

As a small independent company we don’t have a sales agent, so we have to meet all the buyers ourselves. Normally in the days following London Fashion Week Alexander and I lock ourselves in a hotel suite in the centre of town and receive buyers from all over the world. We ply them with alcohol, fill them with chicken salad and funsize bits of pizza, and pay some poor sod of a model to parade in front of them in our stuff, crossing our fingers that they might actually put in an order. It’s an exhausting process. I sit and smile so hard I need botox and fillers by the end of the session in order to look normal. And Alexander spends most of his time biting his tongue in an effort to appear pleasant. We could farm it all out to a sales agent and put our stuff in with a whole lot of other designers, but quite

frankly, after they've taken their cut of between 5 and 10 per cent, the profit I make on the year would disappear altogether.

The large labels, or those who have been bought out by huge conglomerates, like the big daddy of them all, LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy), do it a bit differently. They sell out of permanent showrooms or warehouses in town. For the next five days after each of the London, New York, Paris and Milan fashion weeks buyers from the likes of Harvey Nichols, Harrods, Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman's will all turn up to sexed-up warehouses to view, choose and purchase the clothes. All of the Gucci Group clobber is in permanent showrooms. So Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen and Yves Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga, Sergio Rossi, and, of course, Gucci all have their own people and spaces. The same goes for LVMH, so Chloé, Pucci and Louis Vuitton, Celine, Marc Jacobs, Fendi, Givenchy and Donna Karan all have their own warehouses and selling teams. With over a billion euros' profit for the first half of 2005, LVMH have got a lot of selling to do. Even smaller companies like Club 21, who own Luella Bartley and Mulberry, have permanent showrooms all over the fashion world.

With so much money at stake, the warehouse/showroom set-up is extremely professional, manned by about fifteen to twenty sales staff. The buyers turn up at their allotted time and are walked around the showroom with a clipboard. Each of them is given markers or plastic discs in their own particular colour so that their choices can easily be seen. They are checked in by a sales rep when they arrive and their last order is called up on the computer. They are logged in and their budget is agreed in advance. If, for example, they spent £50,000 last season, they are asked if they are planning to spend the same, or if they want to increase the budget by 10 or 15 per cent for this season. So while Alexander and I are genuflecting to the left and right,

singing for our supper and prancing around for our pounds, the big guns are getting straight down to business. Their profit and budgets are so huge, you're either buying or you're not. They're just keen to get on with it. Occasionally some buyers need to see the clothes on a model, and there is a coterie of stick-thin smiley girls sitting around in thongs backstage, waiting to see if Harvey Nichols wants a quick reminder of that Marc Jacobs skirt before she makes up her mind. They may not be the most beautiful models but they are certainly all perfectly proportioned, with large, shiny smiles on their thin faces.

This year, in an attempt to familiarize the buyers with the brand, we have decided not to hire a hotel suite but to have them come to the studio. It was Alexander's idea really. He said that it would be a good way to network the buyers, to make them feel part of our family; perhaps they might feel compelled to spend a little more as a result. With most of the big-store fashion directors and buyers on their way to Milan or already there, Alexander also suggested that instead of spending money on a house model, persuading Mimi to do it might be a good idea. Strangely for someone who is loath to put herself out for anyone, Mimi has agreed. Perhaps, like most stylists, she has always wanted to be a model, or perhaps she had nothing better to do. Either way Mimi turns up half an hour later than she was told and half an hour earlier than we want her. Lying is the only way to get her anywhere on time.

Posh, pretty and plummy, Mimi is six feet tall, rake thin and a mass of red curls. She once did a foundation course and a year of textiles in Newcastle, but it was far too far away from London, so she couldn't stay the course. She is fabulously well connected, summers in the south of France, and is best friends with everyone at *Vogue*. She doesn't just work for me. She styles endless magazine and advertising shoots and could make plenty of money if she weren't so disorganized, lazy and fond of smoking pot. She does have

a sideline in celebrity styling, mostly LA actresses promoting their films over here. She spends a lot of time sewing famous people into frocks and has had her nose in so many celebrity armpits she can tell you who's got a hygiene problem, a fat arse, or been under the knife.

'Hi, hi, hi,' she says as she breezes in in a pair of black drainpipe skinny jeans and an enormous pair of reflector shades, looking a little like a fly. She is carrying a large leather handbag/shopper, a phone, a latte, an umbrella, three plastic bags and a huge Gucci carrier. 'Darling!' she says to me. 'Alexander,' she adds. 'Just fucking come and take a look at this.' She drops everything in a pile on the floor and pulls an apple-green handbag out of the Gucci carrier. 'Honestly,' she says, sniffing the bag, stroking it. She is practically salivating. 'It's the new It bag for the season.' She grins. 'I can't believe it.' She squeals, and holds it up so that we can all bask in its reflected glory. 'Wouldn't you go down on your grandmother for that?'

'My grandfather,' says Alexander, walking over to touch it. 'It's fabulous. What do you think?'

'It's fantastic,' I say.

'Isn't it?' says Mimi, so pleased with herself.

As we all gather around the handbag, something leaps out from between our feet.

'Jesus!' screams Alexander, throwing himself back against the wall. He is not a man noted for his bravery. 'What the hell is that?'

'Oh, don't be mean,' says Mimi, bending down and looking around under the sofa. 'It's Mini Me.'

'Mini what?' asks Alexander.

'Mini Me,' says Mimi, gathering up a very small black dog. 'She's a toy poodle.'

'Poodle?' says Alexander.

'A poodle,' repeats Mimi. 'Everyone's doing dogs.'

'I thought dogs were last year,' I say.

'No, last year it was babies,' she says.

'I thought this year was knitting,' says Alexander.

'It is,' says Mimi. 'Knitting and dogs. Sienna's got two. Porgy and Bess.'

'Well, we'd all better get one,' says Alexander.

'We all have,' says Mimi. Bringing the pooch to her mouth she lets the dog lick her on the lips. 'Give Mummy a kiss. Kissy kissy kissy.'

'Oh God, don't,' says Alexander. 'You're making me feel sick. It's just been licking its own arse.'

'She hasn't,' protests Mimi.

'Of course not,' he replies. 'And it doesn't crap either.'

'Well, I think she's lovely,' I say, scratching its head and shooting Alexander a look. Mimi is, after all, doing us a favour. 'Just no peeing on the carpet.'

'She's perfectly house trained,' declares Mimi. 'Go on then, sweetie,' she says to the dog and with one click of her fingers the dog jumps into the large leather shopper bag. 'See!'

Alexander ushers Mimi and Mini Me next door and gives her a couple of cans of Coca-Cola, an ashtray, a place to plug in her mobile phone and enough copies of *Heat*, *Grazia* and back issues of *Vogue* to keep her busy for the rest of the day. In the meantime Trish goes upstairs to sort out the mess. I busy myself with the front of house, puffing up the purple velvet sofa, straightening the framed magazine covers we have behind the reception desk, and making sure we have enough champagne, fruit and water.

Just like with front-row etiquette, there is an art to and a hierarchy in selling. The more important you are, the longer your appointment, the more sociable your time slot and the more likely you are to be offered champagne. Flossy from Essex with her hubby-bought-it shop who places orders of under £2,000 is usually offered a crisp and a glass of water; she has a 5.30 slot and is kicked out on the stroke of six. Saffron from Net-a-porter, on the other hand, can stay as long as she likes. She is given at least one