

‘I’ve done it!’ I paced around in my little flat in my heels, slowing my breathing. ‘Six years after it came out, I’ve finally just perfected the “Single Ladies” dance routine.’

‘Congratulations,’ said Laurie down the phone. ‘Does that mean you haven’t left home yet?’

‘I’m not getting a boyfriend now – all this hard work’s not going to waste,’ I warned her.

‘Fine, you don’t have to get a boyfriend today, but you do have to get on the Tube and get down to Wimbledon.’

‘Are you there already?’

‘Not far. Now take off that leotard—’

*How did she know?*

‘—and get your smelly self into the shower.’

I put down the phone and peeled off my sweaty leotard and heels, chuffed to bits with my achievement. I hummed and danced all the way into my lovely waterfall shower in my lovely turquoise bathroom, surrounded by only beautiful-smelling girl stuff, feeling as happy as ever to be living alone. And after I stepped out, I pulled on a dress and flung open the curtains as if I hadn’t been doing anything weird.

‘Hello out there,’ I said to the brightly dressed people of Notting Hill. ‘How’s the furnace this morning?’

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The Tube train shuddered to a stop, allowing another heave of bodies to clamber aboard, while two more rivulets of sweat pole-danced their way down the backs of my legs. It was pretty sexy. London hadn’t been this hot since the great fire in 1666 (possibly), and the residents were dropping like flies and grumbling all the way round the Circle line.

I like London in the heat – the more *scorchio* the better. I like it when tourists flock in and their preconceived idea of an England gushing with rain is carried away on a warm breeze; cloudy, bruised skies windscreen-wiped to reveal bright, royal blue.

And there’s nothing a Brit loves more than sitting out in the midday sun at the first sign of summer, which was why I was joining hundreds of people on the annual pilgrimage to Wimbledon for the start of the tennis. My friend Laurie is an event photographer, which means she gets coveted seats at amazing stuff, and as I’m the only stable other half in her life I’m often along for the ride.

I lifted the hem of my maxidress off the floor, cooling my ankles. I'd seen Paris Hilton wearing a similar maxi at Coachella this year, and thought it would be perfect for Wimbledon, but looking at my fellow passengers in their Jack Wills and Ralph Lauren I felt a bit silly in the tie-dye ensemble.

The doors finally dragged open at Southfields, throwing up its contents upon the platform, and I followed the crowd on the fifteen-minute walk to the famed tennis courts.

As I entered the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club Laurie flew at me, an excited bundle of cameras, bags, merchandise and messy black hair. 'Elle! I just saw Venus Williams coming out of the toilet!' she shouted as a greeting.

'Are you sure? I feel like she'd have her own toilet, like in a dressing room.'

Laurie considered this. 'Well, I took a photo, so we can check later on. If not, I have a photo of a stunning girl coming out of a toilet.'

'What did you buy?' Laurie's house was chock-a-block with memorabilia from everything she goes to – she's the only one I know who will buy up everything on the overpriced merchandise stalls at a concert, or will actually purchase the robes, flannels and soap dishes from a hotel gift shop rather than just stealing them from her room.

'Everything. I got us T-shirts, pencils and sweatbands,' she said, slipping a fluffy white one on my wrist.

We made a pit stop at a strawberries stand and the bar before hauling all of Laurie's equipment over to Centre Court and positioning ourselves on the green plastic seats, blobs of cream threatening to fall off our strawberries and land with a splat upon the head of the spectator in front, and plastic beer cups splashing foam on my flip-flopped feet. It was only when I noticed the empty seat next to us that I realised someone was missing.

'Hang on, where's Tim?'

'I can't believe I forgot to tell you!' Laurie cried. 'We split up.'

'I can't believe you forget to tell me as well!'

'Well ... he was kind of forgettable. You just proved that yourself.'

We took a moment to mourn the loss of Tim, who was indeed forgettable, so much so that I regularly forgot his name when we were out and kept calling him m'dear.

'What happened?'

'I just couldn't see myself still with him in a couple of years, let alone growing old. He was very nice and everything, a lovely guy really, and I wish I'd felt more towards him, but it was all just a bit "meh". So I broke up with him.'

At that point the crowd shushed as the players, glistening men in crisp white shorts, took their places on opposite ends of the court. We chomped on our juicy strawberries and watched the sweating gents on either side of the net, their balls thunking back and forth, so to speak, accompanied by primal grunting, which turned my thoughts back to relationships.

‘Are you sad?’ I whispered.

‘No. Just disappointed that it didn’t work out, again.’

‘The ladies aren’t going to be happy about this setback,’ I reprimanded her. ‘The ladies’ are our group of girlfriends, brought together through university, a mismatched group of opposites who all attracted. All of them, except for Laurie and me, grew up and are now in one or more of the marriage, mortgage or baby club. And they are positively, plague-infestedly itching for us to join.

‘Tell me about it. When Tim and I met Jasmine for drinks a few weeks back she actually started suggesting ideas for our honeymoon. I just ...’ Laurie trailed off and sighed heavily into her strawberries and cream. ‘I just don’t want to keep dating and never feeling like I’m actually getting close to anyone.’

‘I know,’ I soothed. I didn’t know. The thought of getting close to someone, having them move into my home, having to make joint decisions on what TV to watch and what to have for dinner, knowing that if I want to work late I should let my ‘other half’ know just all seemed like a lot of effort.

‘I don’t want to feel like I’m putting on a show,’ Laurie said a while later.

‘No.’

‘I don’t want to feel like I’m always the bridesmaid.’

‘But you’ve never been a bridesmaid. It’s actually really fun. You feel super-important.’

‘I just want to feel ...’

‘What?’

‘Love.’

‘—*LOVE!*’ boomed the umpire down on the court.

‘Leave me alone!’ Laurie cried back, then hid behind her camera as about twenty people turned to shush us.

We settled back to watch the game, neon-yellow balls whizz across the blue sky and getting thwacked back where they came from with a grunt. I was itching to give my attention back to Laurie, worried she was sat there suffering in silence, and eventually there was a break in play and the stands broke into excited chatter.

‘I’m over internet dating, you know,’ said Laurie, turning to me, her tongue wedged into the bottom of her bowl, licking the cream.

‘Really? You’re taking a break from men, joining me as a happily single lady?’

‘Hell no, I’m just going to do things the old-fashioned way, and meet someone face to face.’

‘Well that sounds sensible. Are you going to join a new gym or something?’

‘No, no, we’re not going to do that ...’ Laurie smirked at me with her *I’ve had an idea* face. ‘I’ve had an idea. And it’s a really, really good idea that I really, really want you to join me on. I think we deserve a holiday.’

‘Ooo yes! I love holidays. It’s been too long. Where shall we go? Cancún? Greece? Thailand again?’ I raised my eyebrows at her.

‘Well actually I’ve already chosen the holiday, but I think you’ll love it.’

‘Oh.’

‘Hold this.’ Laurie handed me her empty, saliva-covered strawberry dish and reached down between her legs to her handbag. After some unladylike struggling she picked up her beer and gulped the remainder, handing me the empty cup as well. She then yanked out a thin, glossy brochure and placed it on her lap, laying her hands over it. On the cover, between her fingers, I saw a large, glistening glass of wine with a sun-drenched background of a vineyard. Interesting – I do like wine and sunshine.

The crowd cheered and Laurie lifted her hands to clap, as if she knew what was going on, and my eyes caught the title of the brochure.

‘“*You Had Me at Merlot*” Holidays,’ I read. ‘What kind of a holiday is this?’

‘It’s a vineyard holiday, in Italy.’

‘That sounds nice. A little red, a little white, a little siesta in the sun.’

‘A little smoochy smoochy with some *full-bodied* men?’

‘What?’

‘Nothing, I mean, except it’s, like, a group trip.’

‘Like a tour?’

‘No, more like a get-to-know-you holiday, where you do activities with other people ...’

I watched one of the players pour a bottle of water over himself at the side of the court, much to the swooning of one of the women in the Royal Box. ‘So you *have* to mingle with the other guests?’

‘It’s kind of an essential.’

‘But what kind of a— Is this a *singles*’ holiday?’ I hissed.

‘Yes, but I really want to go, and I really want you to come with me.’

‘No way.’

‘Please, Elle. It’ll be so much fun.’

‘I really don’t want to do this.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because ... *You Had Me at Merlot*? It just sounds incredibly cringey.’ I took the brochure from her. ‘It’s going to be all greasy Casanovas and titillating drinking games.’ But, flipping through the pages, I saw pictures of sunrises over medieval villages, rolling vine-covered hills, delicious Italian platters and no bondage-masked men or booze buses.

‘You’re always saying how much you *loooove* being single, so why wouldn’t you love a singles’ holiday?’

‘Because the whole point of a singles’ holiday is to meet potential partners!’

‘I guess—’

‘Or is it just to have a romp in the sunshine?’

‘No, the first one. Well, maybe a bit of the second. But this isn’t an eighteen-to-thirty holiday, Elle, it’s a really classy affair. Just like you.’ She prodded my sweaty arm and gave me a look that told me she already knew I’d agree.

‘I can’t leave work.’

‘Yes you can. You haven’t taken any holiday yet this year.’

‘Can’t we go to Cancún?’

‘Next year, I promise.’

I sighed. ‘What would I have to do on this holiday? Is there anything to occupy me while you’re off sampling the ... selection.’

‘There’s loads to do.’ She opened the brochure at a page that showed a smiling middle-aged couple leaning against a row of Vespas, the immense terracotta frontage of Bella Notte vineyard rising behind them. ‘You can pick grapes, you can go for walks, you can borrow a Vespa and explore the area. Or you can just taste-test all the wines and fall asleep in the sunshine.’

My friend is annoying. It’s like she has a built-in algorithm that targets my weak points and knows exactly what to hard-sell them with. And the thought of sleep and sun and endless wine had me considering her proposal. In a way, you could say she had me at ‘Merlot’. Dear God, what was I getting myself into?