

Chapter 1. The Bank Job

I was feeling rather emotionally deflated after the appointment with the bank manager and decided to swing by my mother's house on the way home.

After a recent visit to London (where I had had the opportunity to observe the latest fashion trends), I returned to Penswithian determined to make some radical changes to my boutique, Tres a la Mode, as it was now called.

Changing the name from Tres Elegant, to Tres a la Mode (which I thought might sound more appealing to a younger clientèle, even if they didn't know what it meant, it would just sound more trendy), was my first plan of action. Give the whole shop a new lease of life, before I could no longer pay the lease.

Then, what I really needed to do, was to buy in some new stock and give the whole shop a complete make-over.

Unfortunately, after a particularly quiet winter, with sales down dramatically, there was hardly any cash left languishing in my bank account and a refurbishment was going to require some expenditure.

Mr Gittings, the branch manager, or more correctly, Senior Executive Financial Adviser (as stamped on the badge pinned to his left pocket), was initially quite friendly and keen to hear what proposition I intended to set before him.

He ushered me into a cubical and gestured for me to take a seat.

However, after bringing my bank details up on his computer screen and looking at my account information his expression changed from eager interest, to mild disdain.

By the time the words, business loan, came out of my mouth, it was fairly obvious that he wanted to terminate the meeting and head back to his office, as soon as possible.

Mr Gittings then went briefly through the motions of typing some details into his computer, before announcing that my request, for an over-draught facility, had been rejected, outright, by the computer. I wondered if there was any way in which he could override the computer's decision and maybe listen to my idea for increasing the annual profit margin of my business?

It seemed not, the computer's word was final and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Of course, if my financial circumstances were to notably improve, Mr Gittings said that I should not hesitate to make an appointment with one of the Community Bankers (as in, the personnel who manned the kiosks), who would be only too willing to assist.

A pleasure to see you, Ms Pettigrew, he lied, hurrying me from his office with talk of an important staff meeting, which apparently, should have taken place five minutes ago.

As my presence had hardly graced his office for just under five minutes, I suggested to Mr Gittings that he really ought to consider employing a better secretary, and further pointing out, that his present personal assistant was obviously incompetent and incapable of creating a workable schedule of appointments.

You could hardly have been in a staff meeting, and also listening to an extremely interesting scheme for retail development, from a valued customer, at the same time, could you? I remarked, before

flouncing out through the door with as much dignity as I could muster, following such an abrupt refusal.

After tapping out the entrance key numbers on my mother's front door, I stood in the hallway and announced my arrival.

She was busy painting away in her studio and I wasn't at all sure whether she was actually that thrilled by my interruption.

No matter, after pouring us both a large gin and tonic, mum was ready to hear my verbal barrage of complaints.

Which, amongst many others, included how poor the shop sales were in comparison to last year, how desperately I needed to drum up some new business, how the bankers were only too happy to help themselves to our funds, without giving anything back, and how pathetic it was that computers now seemed to make all the decisions and pretty much, run the world.

After I finished my long-winded gripe, mum topped up our gin's and pondered over my predicament. Initially, and most generously, she offered some financial assistance.

I knew she was now earning an extremely good income from her paintings and would be only too happy to transfer some of it into my account, however, foolish pride made me push the offer aside. It was my fashion business, I had built it up from nothing, single-handed, and I was damn well going to build it all right back up again.

Well, the money is there Eva, should you change your mind, she insisted, before suggesting that maybe having a sale would be a good idea.

Church Street is rather off the beaten track, you need to entice more people down there, rather than just veering straight down the main high street.

A sale, would be neither a novel or advisable idea, I retorted rather testily (I was still in an irritable frame of mind after Gitting's brutal analysis of my waning finances).

Tres a la Mode is an exclusive boutique, not some cheap throwaway fashion store. The clothes I sell are quality and people know that because they are expensive.

Well, maybe they are too expensive Eva. Have you thought of that? We are going through difficult economic times! All this endless talk of Brexit, national debt, cutbacks. Everyone is feeling very unstable.

Of course, we are always financially struggling down here in Penswithian, but there's still plenty of wealthy people in London.

Well, that's the trouble, isn't it, Eva, they're in the city and not down here where you're shop is, she quipped.

I begged to differ.

They may work and mainly live in the metropolis, but Cornwall has become a very desirable and popular holiday and mini-break destination. That's what it said in the Sunday Times anyway.

Apparently, it's up there with Tuscany and the Dordogne. Lots of celebrities have second homes down here now. That couple off that daytime telly show, you know, old whatstheirnames, anyway, they've got a house in Helston, and the comedian that was in that sitcom I can't now remember the name of, well, she's got a farm out near Pendeen, or somewhere. Spats says that Gwyneth Paltrow

and Chris Martin from Coldplay came down to Cornwall and stayed out at St. Buryus just before their conscious uncoupling.

Well, it's hardly surprising then that they uncoupled, scoffed mum, fancy taking your wife on holiday to St. Buryus, it's the back of beyond! One pub, a church, and a spattering of old cottages. Not famed for it's friendliness to strangers either! With their money, they could have gone to any one of the most beautiful and elite resorts, like the ones you see advertised in glossy magazines. I wouldn't be surprised if it hadn't rained all the time they were here either. They were probably holed up for days in one of those tiny damp holiday cottages that are always furnished with worn out nineteen seventies furniture. Hardly conducive to a happy holiday or romantic break, is it?

I suggested that we returned to the all-important subject that I had visited her in order to discuss, me. It's not just Londoners and celebrities that have a higher than average income, I reminded her. Don't forget, even down here there are some professions that reap a very reasonable standard of living. Take dentists and vets for instance. People's teeth will continue to rot and their pets will inevitably fall ill or die. A vet charges fifty pounds or more just for giving your cat a lethal injection, and that takes seconds, and if the animal's not ready to be put down, you're potentially looking at an operation that could cost thousands. Don't even get me started on dentists. I don't believe I even needed those fillings, and what's the point of a hygienist? They just nag you incessantly about flossing...

I know what you mean Eva, I spent over five hundred pounds on our lovely old Persian, Mauritius, and then she was put down in the end anyway. I think they knew all along that she was a hopeless case. The vet just wanted to extract as much of my savings as possible before the cats inevitable, and quite foreseeable, demise. After all the money I spent at that clinic you would have thought that they could have thrown in the final injection for free.

Anyway, I interrupted, once again, we digress from the subject at hand.

I know an article in the local paper would help. It's just that I need to come up with something new for the rag to write about.

Have a promotional evening of sorts, like a cheese and wine event or something, That should bring a few people in, and probably get you a short piece in the press, was mum's next ill-thought-out proposal.

I'm sure it would, I agreed, all the local free-loaders and alcoholics would be heading in, in their droves. You just don't go around offering free wine and food down here in Penswithian, there isn't the right mentality for it. They would all simply come in, chuck as much booze down their throats as possible, and then head off to the nearest pub, probably sloshing wine on the rails of clothes and treading Caerphilly into the carpet on their way out.

What about getting your sister Tiffany's twins down from London for a visit. Then, get the press to send someone around to photograph the girls outside your shop. They really are becoming quite famous on that clubbing circuit. Hardly a week goes by now when there isn't some sort of twin-related news in the tabloids. Who would have thought it?

Not me, I certainly wouldn't have, I must say, and I'm not sure famous is quite the right word, notorious is more apt for the sort of coverage they tend to generate. Anyway, that would have been great publicity, and the twins promised to come down and make a big hoo-ha about visiting the shop

when they are next in town. The trouble is, now that they are on the fame ladder there doesn't seem to be time for much else, least of all family. So, who knows, they could be down in a couple of weeks, or we might not see them for six months. You can't even speak to the girls directly any more. The last time I telephoned my call was immediately diverted to their agent, who informed me that my nieces were fully booked practically every minute of every day for the foreseeable future.

Even poor Tiffany said that she rarely hears from them. Still, as I reminded her, at least you know where they are and what they're up to, all you need to do is pop down to the local newsagents and you're bound to see some coverage of their latest exploits spread all over the front covers.

Though I did warn Tiffs that her girls are reportedly hanging around a lot with all those rather unsavoury rapper types at the moment. Most of whom have been dragged up in the ghettos of New York where it's all about gangs, violence and throwing your trainers up in the air so that they dangle from street signs the like. What that's all about, I have no idea!

That's the trouble though Eva, girls always go for the bad boys. I had a real crush on Alvin Stardust in the seventies. 'My coo ca choo' was his best song. That tight leather shirt and trousers really suited him. Oh, and those black gloves he wore! The sultry enticing way he looked into the camera as if he was talking to you and no one else. I should have held out for someone like that, instead of marrying your father. The twins ought to make the most of their fame and enjoy themselves and you know, being a disc jockey is a highly regarded profession these days. Take that Fat Boy something or other, he earns an absolute fortune going to clubs and playing records.

I couldn't help but scoff.

What on earth do you know about the clubbing scene, or DJ's, and it's 'Fat Boy Slim' for goodness sake.

Whether he is a fat slim boy, or a fat boy getting slim, is neither here nor there. The names rather silly when you think about it, a complete contradiction in terms. Also, don't forget, the twins are women breaking into a largely male-dominated profession. You have to admire them for that.

Again, I could see that the conversation was losing its intended thread. If we were going to end up discussing equal rights and the suffragette's, one of her favourite subjects then we could be here all evening. I needed to get back home and update Spats about my meeting with the Gitting's man, whilst sticking a pizza in the oven.

I just wanted some money for a facelift, that's all, I said to mum, as I heading for the door.

Now that's ludicrous Eva, and I completely withdraw my offer of a loan if you are going to spend it on unnecessary surgery. You've got a perfectly good jawline, it's only when you put on weight that it tends to look slightly slack. That old guy up the road, you know, the one that's got a crush on you, well, he said just the other day, "your Eva could have been a fashion model if she had been a bit taller".

I honestly despair of that woman at times, was she being deliberately obtuse?

However, her final remark had got me thinking.

Fashion model.

Now, mum, I said, that's what I call a brilliant idea, that would bring some money in.

She looked worried.

I don't wish to be harsh Eva, the old guy did say, could have been, as in, the past tense. I'm afraid the chance of a modelling contract at your age is most unlikely. Mind you, there are those catalogues that use older women for their frumpier clothes and body shaping underwear.

For goodness sake, I'm not talking about me! I was forced to explain. I meant models, as in catwalk models, a fashion show. If I put on a fashion show I would be almost certain to secure an entire half, to maybe even a whole page. in the local paper, lots of great pictures too. Don't you see, it's perfect. Excellent free publicity and you can charge people to come and see it as well.

You've never put on a fashion show, Eva, mum reminded me, unnecessarily. Where do you even begin? I'm sure it's a huge amount of work.

I felt obliged to present my credentials as a very good organiser of events.

People have often praised my ability to put on a show, I reminded her. Remember when I had that Elvis themed party? Nearly everyone said that they had had a really good evening. It wasn't as easy to organise as you might think. Finding a venue, arranging a buffet, as well as buying a karaoke machine and life-size cardboard Elvis on eBay, it was no mean feat. We gave Elvis away at the end of the night as one of the raffle prizes. Once I set my mind to something I give it my all, and this is going to be the best damn fashion show this old seaside town has ever seen!

Feeling quite exhilarated and all fired up, I hurried home to inform Spats of my new plan of action and wallow in another good old moan about the bank.

Chapter 2 Getting Hold Of The Ganja

Spats liked the idea instantaneously, as I knew he would, and was keen to get involved.

You're going to need a compère Eva and I'm only too happy to put myself forward for that role.

I could see no reason why he shouldn't be, Spats certainly had a voice which could carry and a presence that couldn't be ignored.

However, first things first, I urged.

We need the right place to hold the show. It must have a stage, seating, a bar and a reasonable size dressing room for the models. Also, we have to take the cost of hiring the venue, into consideration.

Nothing with all these facilities initially sprang to mind.

Then it came to me, the Ganja Theatre on Ponsendane Street.

The Ganja was the only small local theatre that still remained open in Penswithian.

It had a bar and a small stage downstairs, larger stage upstairs (which was bound to have a changing room for the actors), and it was about the right size. The Ganja intermittently accommodated a variety of entertainment, local plays, stand-up comediennes, folksy music, that sort of thing. Although it was all very dependant on Arts Council funding and permanently under threat of closure.

That would be my first port of call.

I needed to decide on what date it would be best to hold a fashion show and then contact the Ganja to see if it was available for hire at that time.

Deciding when to have the show might be a matter best mulled over with the input and advice of friends, I thought. So, I called up my trusty three, Flora, Zoe and Jackie.

We were all available for a rendezvous at our favourite wine bar, Cosmos, midday on Friday.

Although I had lunched on occasion with all three friends separately, it had been some time since our merry band of four had shared each others company.

Flora was still coming to terms with her husband Harvey's untimely death. It had only been a matter of months since the unexpected tragedy.

Where are you, Harvey? I keep saying, said Flo, a number of times, how could you leave me like this?

Flo's husband Harvey had met a most unfortunate end when he had lost his footing and fallen head first into their carved stone ornamental garden feature, whilst he was at home recovering from a fall down the stairs. After venturing out into the garden, on his crutches, for a quick cigarette, their one-eyed rescue cat, Nelson, had suddenly shot in front of him, thus, causing Harvey to lose his balance and plummet head first onto one of the angels, resulting, in what proved to be, a lethal blow to the head.

It's a long and slightly bizarre story best left untold within these pages.

(To find out what happened read the debut novel by LT W Lucas, 'Hungary For Adventure')

Needless to say, it was a shock to all of us.

Jackie, who last year practically wasted away to nothing when her husband suddenly left her for another woman, had then found happiness with Roy, a long-term friend, and Jackie was now pregnant.

A pregnancy that was beginning to show even though she was still in her first trimester. Either that or she had simply put on weight. Jackie confessed to being tired all the time and craving a lot of chocolate.

Zoe was at present dating the rather good-looking vicar she had met at Harvey's funeral. They had been going out for over two months. I was just hoping that she wasn't going to become a born-again Christian. Her party girl personality had certainly been toned down and Zoe admitted to dedicating much of the later winter months learning to knit, play the ukulele, and singing with the church choir on Sundays. I don't doubt she was a great asset to the choir, as she had a truly wonderful voice, however, the all knitting, gospel singing Zoe, was not quite the Zoe I had come to know and love. Still, she did seem content and happy and I made much of admiring her knitted handbag.

Zoe wanted me to join the new women's group that gathered every Wednesday to play their ukulele's. At first, I thought she must have been joking and felt relieved that she hadn't lost her sense of humour, I was wrong.

It's really great, Zoe insisted, very therapeutic. We've all bought different coloured ukulele's and we sit around learning playing them. We're getting quite good. You'd love it.

Knowing that I really wouldn't love it, at all, I changed the subject to the important matter, in hand, my fashion show.

Flo suggested that April, just before or after Easter, would be the very best time to hold the show and we all agreed.

Springtime, that would be perfect. Everyone would be emerging from the winter doldrums and coming out of hibernation.

So, that decision made, we then focused on costs, ticket prices, and finding models.

Flo was particularly excited by the idea and wanted to help organise the whole event.

First of all, we need to telephone the 'Ganja Theatre' and see how much they charge for hire. Also, we must find out how many tickets we can sell, ask how large an audience the theatre can hold, then figure out a ticket price. What's more, we want to consider a way of maximising the publicity potential, contact the local radio and television stations. Get someone to design the poster. Oh, and will there be food at the after show party?

It suddenly occurred to me what a massive venture I had taken on.

Jackie wondered how I was going to select models and asked if she could be one.

It is only fair to say that Jackie really was beginning to look rather full of figure and her proportions were only going to expand. Jackie had put me in an awkward position and I would need to let her down tactfully.

I'm sorry Jackie, I said, although it is probably a good idea to have some slightly larger models, you know, represent women as they really are, to some extent, it's not going to be easy to accommodate that ever-growing bump. I'm not showcasing a line in maternity wear and we can't afford for the show to look too provincial. I want this event to be just about as professional as it can be. A hand backstage though would be very welcome, if you're willing. Behind the scenes is where it all really matters, getting those models dressed and down the catwalk on time.

Jackie looked rather crestfallen, however, she did concede that her pregnancy might be a drawback and accepted a role out of the limelight.

Zoe thought that perhaps some entertainment might be a good idea for the after show party.

What was all this about an after-show party, and did there have to be an after show anything? Except maybe taking orders for the clothes.

It's the done thing, insisted Zoe, you have to have a party. The more you offer the higher the ticket price can be. Our women's ukulele group would be brilliant. We've learnt a couple of really catchy Dolly Parton tunes, which I could even sing along to, I know all the words to 'Jolene'.

Well, it's certainly something to think about, I remarked, adding that they would all no doubt make quite a sight, but let's just concentrate on the main show for the time being.

Zoe wasn't giving up.

Of course, we could always be on the stage playing as the audience drift in.

The realisation that asking friends for help didn't come without complications, suddenly became evident.

Zoe hadn't, as yet, asked to be one of the models, which I was grateful for as I needed time to consider how suited to the role she would be.

Though she did suggest that her neighbour's daughter was very good looking and would make an excellent model.

Felicity, that's her name, she would love to be in the show, insisted Zoe, and she's had a really tough time of it over the last few months. Her mother took her on a skiing holiday to Switzerland because

their dog got run over. Felicity was quite cut up about Fido's death and her mum thought a holiday away would help with the healing process. Unfortunately, Felicity wasn't all that good at skiing and returned with her leg in a cast. Although the plaster has recently been cut off and she now uses just the one crutch, her mother was moaning to me only the other day about how morose and depressed Felicity had recently become. Being in the show would give her something to look forward to. Two words Zoe, model, and crutch, how does that sound to you? Does it sound like a winning combination? I asked.

Oh, I'm sure she doesn't really need that crutch any more Eva. In my opinion, it's simply a gambit to gain sympathy and taunt her mother for running over the dog and breaking her leg.

What about hair? Interjected Flo.

Oh yes, she's got lovely hair too! All long and blonde.

No, I don't mean has the neighbour's daughter got hair, Flo was forced to explain. We shall need to have someone on hand to do the girls hair. Make-up too. You can't just stick clothes on them and send them out with un-coiffed hair and bad make-up.

Flo was, of course, right. I could see that Flo (unlike Zoe and Jackie), could be a real asset in putting this show together.

I'm good with make-up insisted Jackie.

Oh dear, I thought, I'm stumbling through a minefield of egos here! Yes, Jackie does seem to have no problem accurately applying eyeliner, why she thinks this might qualify her as a hair and make-up artist quite baffles me.

We need people who know what they are doing, professional, qualified people, I explained. I was beginning to feel really rather tetchy at this point.

We want someone who has had more experience than simply knowing one end of a hairbrush from the other and how to use an eye-pencil without blinding themselves. I'm thinking, local hairdressers, maybe that rather smart new one, and asking Shelia from the cosmetics counter at the chemists, whether she would offer her services. She does make-overs. Admittedly, when my sister Tiffany went there for a visual transformation, she came out looking like a drag queen, but after all, we are going to want a pretty full on, dramatic fashion show kind of look.

Zoe finally rallied and came up with a very good point.

It's all very well wanting professionals, however, they are hardly going to just help us out for no good reason, are they?

True, I thought, what would be in it for them?

Flo felt that maybe we could persuade them to offer their skills for free by emphasising this great opportunity to ride our publicity wave.

Tell them how great the exposure will be, mention local radio and a big spread in the Cornish Times, she said.

That's all very well, said Zoe, but if you're going to be charging ten pounds a ticket, which seems about the right amount to me, and you're expecting them to give up all their time with nothing more than the offer of some free publicity, they may not feel that they are getting such a great deal, especially as you will be making money on the door and selling clothes.

Another point well made, I thought, and one for which I didn't have an immediate answer.

Jackie, however, did.

Charity, tell them ticket sales are in aid of some charity. If you let people know that you're doing something for charity they feel obliged to offer their help for nothing.

The idea of handing over the ticket takings to some charitable organisation was not particularly appealing. However, Jackie was right. I would still get publicity, hopefully, some good sales from the show, and I could also go around boasting about my fundraising event.

Flo was all for it.

It's not easy for someone to turn down a plea for assistance when you say it's for charity and you can then be certain of getting some publicity as well.

The necessary plans were unfolding. I ordered us another bottle of Chardonnay and we turned our thoughts to the worthy cause.

Cancers always a good one, everyone knows someone who has had cancer, insisted Zoe.

We then all compared how many people we knew who had had cancer, it really did tot up to quite a few between just the four of us.

Or an animal charity, suggested Flo. Cats perhaps. Us Brits are all mental about animals. Apparently, the RSPCA makes far more money than the NSPCC. People are much more fond of animals than they are of children.

Which are the most popular though, I questioned, dogs or cats?

Flo tried to convince us that cats were the most popular, though that's probably just her personal opinion as she can't abide dogs.

Zoe was probably right in insisting that dogs were the most favoured animal.

However, Flo suddenly seemed determined that we should be raising money for the 'Cats Rescue Centre' where she had found Nelson.

What's more, she went on, Nelson could even feature in the show in some small way. People would love it, seeing a cat on stage, it would be so novel.

So, it seemed that even Flo wanted to be in on the act. Having said that, maybe we could use Nelson to some advantage, perhaps have him sitting on a table at the entrance to promote the raffle. With his one eye and torn ear, he would certainly rustle up some sympathy for the cause.

Jackie felt strongly that we should be raising money for a children's charity, which seemed fair enough, and I was all for it.

Luckily, I came up with an idea to keep them both happy. It seemed only right that children should take presidents over cats. However, I proposed to Flo that the money made from tickets sales would all go to the NSPCC, whilst funds raised from the raffle would be given to the 'Cats Rescue Centre'. You could go on stage at the end of the show with Nelson and read out the winners, I suggested to Flo, who seemed more than happy with this idea.

In fact, this was the happiest I had seen Flo since the sad passing of Harvey, and I felt a warm glow inside, not just from the Chardonnay, but from knowing that in some small way I was helping my friend through a difficult time.

Jackie was pleased that she had finally had an idea that had been upheld, although she still seemed rather peeved that I hadn't taken her up on her offer to model.

Luckily, a new and perfect excuse suddenly dawned on me.

The main reason it would be unwise for you to be a model Jackie, I explained, is because this is a physically very vulnerable time for you. Even though it's early days and you still look quite sylphlike, I lied, we can't risk you having a fall, not in your condition. If you're out there tottering down the runway in six-inch heels it would simply be too dangerous. A tumble in your condition, well, it doesn't bare thinking about!

Against my better judgement, I then told Zoe that I would give the ukulele idea some real consideration, and asked her to send the neighbours daughter down to the shop so I could see if the girl was catwalk material.

She really is lovely insisted Zoe. Like I said, hair down to her waist. Her mum will be thrilled with the idea and it will put me back in her good books. The mother's been very frosty with me since my last boyfriend turned out to be a kleptomaniac. Clothes kept disappearing from her washing-line, a collection of solar powered fairy lights disappeared, and their recycling bin went astray.

Understandably, she became increasingly upset and was keen to catch the guilty party. Then, one day, she caught Brian red-handed. There he was, standing in her backyard with her favourite bra and the garden hose, about to make his exit back into my rear area. I suspect that she still doesn't entirely believe I had no knowledge of Brian's issues. I said to her. Look, Doreen, Brian's a community policeman, how was I to know!

Anyway, if you let little Felicity in your show, I'm sure it will in some way make amends for the underlying rift in our neighbourly friendship.

Something about the way Zoe said, 'little Felicity', worried me.

I was just about to ask her to clarify why she had included the word, little, in that particular sentence, when she announced she had a dentist appointment and made a sudden and hasty exit.

Jackie also felt that it was time to leave.

Unable to drink wine due to her condition, she had had to make do with a couple of glasses of ginger ale and I fear that watching the rest of us quaffing the grape had been something of a strain.

Flo had to get back to Nelson.

If she was out too long, she said, he was prone to ripping up sections of the stair carpet and messing on her duvet as a form of protest.

Chapter 3. The Crap Woman

There was no time to be wasted, so a few days after my lunch with Flo, Zoe and Jackie, I telephoned the Ganja to inquire about rates and availability.

The fee to hire the entire theatre, both upstairs and downstairs, was considerably more than I had expected. We would need the theatre on the day of the show for the final dress rehearsal. I played the fundraising card and questioned whether some sort of a concession on cost might be considered.

I could quite clearly hear the tone of disdain in the woman's voice at the other end of the phone. Fundraising fashion show, she retorted. I'm not sure that the Ganja is really the best place to hold your event. We're more of a theatre, people come here to see Pinter and Shakespeare, poetry readings and musical recitals, that sort of thing. You might be better off contacting one of the local hotels to see if they would offer the use of their entrance foyer or something.

Margery Lillycrap was her name, and she had just succeeded in rubbing me up the wrong way, an unwise move.

I beg to differ, Mrs Crap, I replied. I believe the Ganja is just the place for the sort of theatrical and stunning show I have in mind. This will be no ordinary fashion show, mark my words, and I don't doubt that the theatre will be packed to the gunnels on the big night.

It's not Crap, she snapped back, it's Lillycrap.

Well, I'm delighted that we can be on first name terms Lilly, you can call me Eva rather than Ms Pettigrew if you wish. Anyway, I'm sure the Arts Council would prefer that the Ganja was put to good use rather than left empty and devoid of any sort of entertainment for weeks on end, as it seems to have been of late.

Is Friday the twentieth of April available?

Margery seemed to have taken an unfathomable dislike to the whole idea of my show and was intent on being difficult, insisting that she would need time to consider my proposal and perhaps put the matter in front of the Arts and Actors committee.

Time is of the essence, I went on to explain. There is a great deal to organise, especially the publicity. The sooner we get the publicity bandwagon rolling, the better, and advertising the date will, of course, be crucial. I'm thinking press, radio and even local television coverage. It would look very community and Arts Council spirited if I could mention that your little theatre had supported us and offered some sort of financial assistance, as in, a cheaper hire fee due to the fundraising nature of the event. We are raising money here for cruelly treated and abused children and cats, I reminded her. Surely that's what it's all about. If I was you Mrs Crap, sorry, Lilly, I would feel a lot more secure in my job if I wasn't sitting in an empty theatre half the week. One that's losing money hand over fist and under permanent threat of closure. I believe that the local Panswathian's will be far more enthusiastic about heading out to a fashion show for the evening than being offered the option of watching some tired old Shakespeare play. Quite frankly, in my opinion, Shakespeare is overrated and we're all thoroughly bored of Romeo. No one enjoys a performance of 'A Midsummer's Nights Dream' except those actually in it. It's a ludicrous play in which one of the main characters is called Bottom and is half ass. As far as Pinter goes, if your general public feels the need to watch awkward social situations unfold, they can just go and spend Christmas with their in-laws, and don't even get me started on performance art. When did actual entertainment become such an issue? Don't let's lose sight of your own personal crusade either. I'm not sure that the locals will be so ready to sign the 'Save Our Ganja' petition next time if they realise that it's just become a venue for a select, self-indulgent, few. You have to remember, it's all about bums on seats, money in the coffers, and I don't doubt that you will make a tidy profit on the bar at the after show party.

Worn down by my long-winded, though clever and persuasive, argument, Margery agreed to halve the hire fee and agreed to pencil in a date.

Although she did insist that we could only have the Saturday night and not the Friday.

I'm pretty sure we have someone coming to do a reading of a translated version of Kafka's letters to his father on that Friday, followed by an interpretation through the medium of dance, of *Metamorphosis*. I could be wrong, Kafka could be the Thursday. Whatever, if you require a confirmed date of availability right now, then it's going to have to be Saturday, as I don't have my diary to hand and my personal assistant is off today.

I had guessed, fairly early on in our conversation, that Margery was the kind of jobs-worth that would want to wield her authority and for this reason I had deliberately asked for the Friday night, knowing full well she would be cantankerous and say that Friday was not available. I had wanted the Saturday evening spot all along, so was absolutely delighted.

You must understand Ms Pettiness

Touché, I thought.

You must understand, we do have overheads, building maintenance, staff wages. Obviously, you will expect to have someone serving behind the bar on the night, and our in-house technical expert must be on hand at all times for health and safety reasons.

This too was an added bonus. I hadn't as yet considered the necessity for a technician. We would need lighting, music, a microphone, all sorts of technical tweaking. It had been a good morning's work. We had the time, the place, and an odd job man.

It's been a pleasure to talk to you Lilly, I lied. I'm glad we managed to come to this mutually beneficial agreement.

It's been a real experience talking to you too Ms Pettiness, and hearing your views on Shakespeare and his lack of popularity have been most enlightening. I shall be passing them on throughout many dinner parties to come, no doubt inducing the long silent pauses for which Mr Harold Pinter's plays are so famed.

At lunchtime, I hurried around to mums to inform her of developments.

Well, Eva, that's a start. Now you need to sort out your collection and find the models.

That shouldn't be too hard, I explained, I have attractive women coming in and out of, *Tres a la Mode*, all the time.

She wanted to know what the average age group of the models would be.

You don't want them all to be too young, a bunch of gangly skinny teenagers who lack the required deportment will not do the clothes justice. Get real women with real bodies who possess some level of maturity and sophistication. Women in their late twenties, early thirties, even throw in a forty-year-old maybe. Make sure they have some curves. In fact, you would do well to choose at least one model that's more your average size fourteen, or maybe even a sixteen, to make the larger lady feel included. Show that you're not fattist. Have a short one too.

Everyone knows that clothes hang better on taller women, I said. It's just a fact. If you think that I am going to go out of my way to find some size sixteen, forty-year-old, five-foot model to thunder down the runway, you're very much mistaken.

You're being ridiculous Eva. I just meant, show some variation so that your audience feel that they can relate to the women up on stage and visualise themselves in the clothes.

I realised that she had made a fair point. However, they would still need to exude some glamour. Women want to look at attractive women and imagine that, with the right hair and outfit, they too could look that good.

Then I had another brilliant idea.

What about having some men in it that the girls can play up to and flirt with, that would give the show a little edge?

You don't have men's clothing in your shop Eva and let me tell you, no one is going to want to look at men in dresses!

No, I explained (though I knew she was really just trying to wind me up), we use the men as props. Have them bring the models on and then hang around on the sidelines to provide some eye candy for the women in the audience. Just three or four, that's all, but really great looking.

Mum thought that this was an excellent idea.

Yes Eva, have them in uniforms or something, maybe military. You wouldn't want them dressed as policeman though, that wouldn't be so sexy. Well, not unless they were dressed as American policemen.

Fireman, that's the uniform I thought would play out best, I said. No woman, absolutely, no woman, can resist a fireman. They have to be tall, fit, muscular and strong. Firemen sacrifice their lives to drag people and pets from burning buildings. If that's not sexy, I don't know what is. I'll never forget that scene in 'Backdraft' when Kurt Russell emerges from the flames with a rescued baby in his arms. I wonder if I could find anyone that looks like Kurt Russell in Penswithian? Probably not.

How many models do you think you will need Eva?

Good question. I've given it quite a lot of thought and have decided on about eight. If I send that many models out in rotation, they will each have enough time to change into their second outfit before it's their turn to be back on stage. As far as male escorts go, probably about four.

Will Spats be one?

Spats was keen to be the compare, the perfect role for him, I explained, and much as I love his rather weighty proportions, I don't think he would work out as an escort for the models.

What about your Gordon? He's a lovely looking young man. I know he's living in London now, but he could always come down for the weekend, couldn't he?

I couldn't see my son Gordon taking to the idea of being in a fashion show at all. Gordon is the introverted type who's interests lie almost exclusively in his obsession with computer programming. Maybe some of the female models will have attractive boyfriends or brothers that could be in on the act. Anyway, I shall just have to start recruiting and take it from there.

What about your brother Seb's, Eva? Maybe Seb's and Cynthia. I'm sure they would love to be involved, given the opportunity.

She was right. I hadn't considered having my brother in the show. Seb's was a good dancer and Cynthia was a great looking girl. The problem with this idea was that they lived in Dorset.

Still, maybe we could persuade them both to come down for a weekend break.

Everything was falling into place.