

HARPERS

& Queen

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EXCLUSIVE!

Madonna

'I've attained all the things everyone wants to attain. And it doesn't mean s**t'

Mrs Ritchie on: discipline, Jesus & why she won't run away from marriage to Guy



It's All About You

Services with a smile

Conquering your personal admin mountain is dull and daunting, but **Harriet Green** finds a breezy team of Vespa-riding secretaries who will cheerily sort out all the little things

The pile had grown as high as my desk. A teetering, dusty tower of bills, receipts and letters that I longed to chuck in the bin. Unfortunately, the rubbish was mixed up with some vitally important documents: the registration details for my car, my tax return, my baby's birth certificate...

Meanwhile, assorted jobs around the house were neglected. I had just one working light bulb in the sitting room. A door handle tended to jam, shutting us inside. And a botched plumbing job desperately needed sorting out. What I needed was a helper, someone who could, if not love my chaotic ways, at least find solutions. I couldn't afford to pay someone on a regular basis; I just wanted someone who could be there when necessary.

It was with someone like me in mind that Claire Brynteson, 35, founded Buy:Time two years ago. She was working as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs and putting in long hours. 'I struggled to manage my career, social commitments and domestic responsibilities, and really could have done with a helping hand. If I was having shutters put up at home, I had to take a day off work to be there. Or I might need a parking permit for my car. There didn't seem to be a product on the market

that fulfilled my requirements, one for people who haven't got the time to get their everyday things sorted.'

Buy:Time charges £35 an hour (or £25 an hour if you book a package of 20 hours). It is currently based in London, but has plans to go nationwide this year. 'Initially, I thought it would all be about waiting in for tradespeople or filing tax returns,' says Brynteson. 'But it has been so much more than that. Clients realise how lovely it is to lean on someone. They start to say, "Can you do this, can you do that... I know I'm spending too much money on my mortgage, can you put in a couple of calls for me?" It might be sorting out a surprise party for their wife, fixing the iPod or collecting the dry-cleaning.'

Connie Jackson, 44, chief executive of St Bartholomew's and the Royal London Charitable Foundation, hired a Buy:Time lifestyle manager, Clare Malins, after concluding that she was too busy even to open her own post. Malins, 29, comes to Jackson's flat for about four hours a week. 'She has given me back so much time. She has set up a



PA CONFIDENTIAL
Tippi Hedren
wearing a sultry
secretary look in the
film *Marni* (1964)

filing system, a chequebook and spending register, and she sorts out all the things I never get round to doing. I've got double-height ceilings, so trying to get a light bulb changed is difficult. Even if I had a ladder - which I don't - I wouldn't do it. Clare finds people for the job at reasonable rates. If I was doing that myself, and I had 50 people coming round for a dinner party, I'd pay three times the going rate for everything because I was desperate.'

It sounded good enough for me. Once I had decided to use Buy:Time, well, I was too busy to call them for a while and anyway, I kept losing the bit of paper with their details on it. But, eventually, Malins arrived on her Vespa, ready for action.

From one day to the next, Malins never knows what she's in for. 'One couple didn't want anyone to know they were getting married, because their friends all thought they'd been married for years. So they asked two of us to go down to Wandsworth Town Hall and be witnesses for them. For a lot of people, we provide the key person in their life when they need help.'

My own requirements were less outlandish. During the three hours Malins spent at my house, she had:

- Sorted out my husband's spreadsheet for his tax return.
- Hassled the bathroom shop that, after two years, still hadn't sent a vital screw for the 'new' shower.
- Taken my skirt to the dry-cleaner to be mended.
- Sorted out the filing.
- Found me a reputable plumber who charged reasonable rates.
- Bought a present on my behalf from a friend's wedding list (the wedding had taken place more than a month earlier).

A model of smiling efficiency, Malins got back on her bike and rode away. Something told me I'd be seeing her again soon. □

Buy:Time (0870 486 2624; www.buy-time.co.uk), from £25 an hour.

BEST OF THE REST

Alter Egos (01189 404993; www.alteregos.org.uk), based in Berkshire, helps with chores and errands for £30 an hour; no joining fee.

Hire Intelligence (020 8487 9450; www.hireintelligence.co.uk) will help sort out paperwork. From £50 an hour; no joining fee.

Life's 2 Short (020 7371 0444; www.lifes2short.co.uk) is a brand-new personal-admin service with a mobile-phone hotline and no membership fee; it costs £45 an hour.

Urban PA (020 8487 9400; www.urbanpa.com) helps with lifestyle management. Joining fee, £200; monthly subscription, £295.