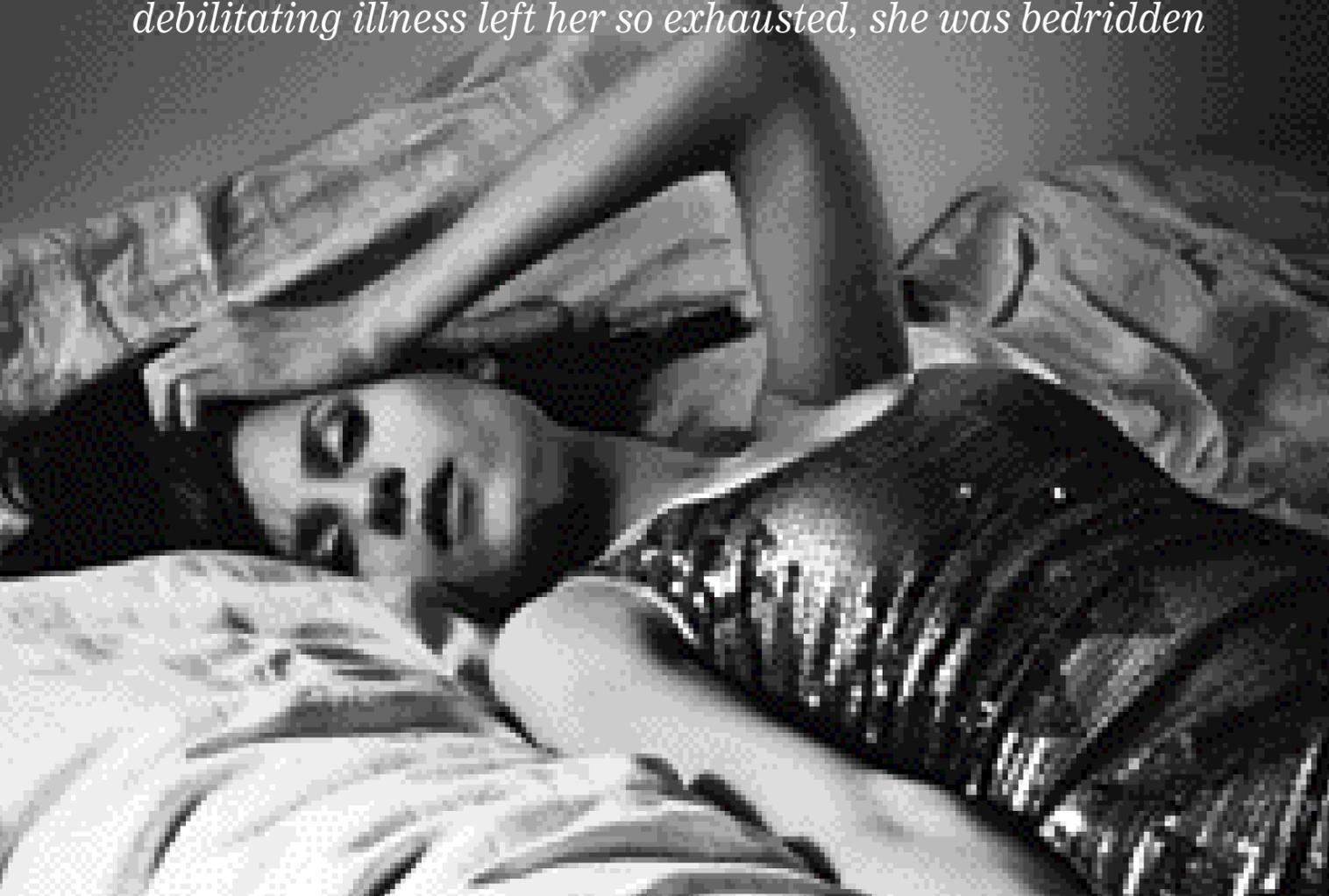


“My Partying Left Me Crippled”

When she first moved to the UAE, 30-year-old Josie Maiolo relished her new work-hard-play-hard lifestyle – until a debilitating illness left her so exhausted, she was bedridden



I heard the doorbell and pulled the duvet tighter around me. ‘Go away,’ I groaned. I knew it would be my friends stopping by to see if I wanted to join them for Friday brunch, something I’d normally jump at the chance of doing at the weekend. But today, I didn’t even have the energy to get out of bed, let alone talk to anyone.

It was November 2009, and I’d

been feeling this way for months. I was 28 and working as a primary school teacher in Abu Dhabi. Ironically, I had a reputation as a bit of a party animal among my friends. Most of them were teachers too, and we all lived in the same apartment block. After working hard all week, our weekends were normally a whirl of brunching, cocktails and clubbing. But recently, all I wanted to do at the weekend

was sleep. I was permanently exhausted; I felt like an 80-year-old trapped in a 28-year-old body and I’d no idea why.

Now, as I listened to my friends impatiently ring my doorbell, I felt too ashamed to open the door and admit the truth: that I just didn’t have the energy to go out. I didn’t want them to think I was a party pooper, or that I was old and boring. So I stayed quiet and hid under my

duvet waiting for them to go away. Then I lay there – sweaty from a night of restless sleep – wondering if this was what my life was going to be like from now on.

Running On Empty

I felt even more depressed when I thought about the girl I used to be. Five years before, when I first moved to the UAE at the age of 23, I was a ball of energy. After living in London for two years, I came to Dubai on holiday, and loved it so much I decided to stay. I immediately found a job teaching in an international school and moved into an apartment in The Greens. Dubai is such a young culture, I found it easy to make friends, and I loved the party lifestyle. Every weekend there was a brunch or a boat party or a concert happening... Every second of every day was timetabled.

My professional life was equally as frenzied. I would be at work by 7am and often wouldn’t leave until six because I was busy working on classroom displays, or doing lesson plans for the following day. Four years passed in a blur of working and partying until I started a new job in September 2009, in a local school in Abu Dhabi. It was in an all girls’ school based out in the desert, teaching a class of 29 six-year-old Arabic girls. I was excited because I was doing something completely different, but because the kids didn’t speak any English, it was a physically demanding role, as it involved a lot of charades, games and hand gestures to be able to communicate effectively with the children.

Months on, I started to notice that I was really tired a lot more than usual. I’d be getting home from school at 4.30pm and I’d have to go for a nap straight away, sometimes sleeping through until 9pm. At the weekends, I started making excuses not to see my friends so I could sleep. My friends would get annoyed when I didn’t show up to birthday parties and events that they’d planned and that I’d agreed to go to, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want to see them, it was just that I physically didn’t have the energy to get myself ready.

My teaching career started suffering too. I used to pride myself on my animated and energetic lessons. But I was finding it more and more of a struggle to even get out of bed, let alone bounce around the classroom for seven hours each day. One day, I burst into tears at my desk during



Josie (second from right) has now swapped Dubai’s party scene for quiet nights at home

“Dubai is such a young culture, I found it easy to make friends, and I loved the lifestyle. Every weekend there was a brunch, a boat party or a concert.”

morning break-time at 11am because I’d no idea how I was going to make it through the rest of the day.

Shock Diagnosis

As well as the tiredness, I was getting headaches all the time too, so I went to see my doctor, who ran blood tests and told me I was fine, that I just needed to make sure I was eating healthily and getting lots of rest. After struggling all term, the Christmas holidays finally came around and I had two weeks off. A group of us took a trip India, and I spent the whole time sleeping in the sun. ‘I’m on holiday, I’m allowed to sleep,’ I told myself.

But back at work, my sleeping patterns got progressively worse. I would wake three or four times in the night,

and it would take me hours to fall back to sleep. I also had nightmares and would wake drenched in sweat. I would sleep every chance got: on the drive to work and even in the classroom before my pupils arrived. Some days I couldn’t get out of bed at all. By May, I was so bad that I phoned in sick and slept for three days straight. After that, I was left with no choice but to resign. I felt awful, as there was only a month of the school year left to go, but I couldn’t go on. I packed up everything and flew home to Australia.

Slowing The Pace

Back in Perth, I went to another doctor, who diagnosed me with chronic fatigue syndrome. ‘You need to rest for three or four months,’ he instructed. I was so thankful that someone finally understood what was wrong with me, I just felt relief. And mum was pleased to have me home so she could look after me. I spent my time sleeping, eating healthy home-cooked meals and going for short walks. I was really sore most of the time – which the doctor told me was muscle fatigue – so I had to lie down a lot. If I’d been out of bed for four hours, even if it was just sitting on the couch, my muscles would get so sore that I’d have to go back to bed. Every week, I tried to walk a little further: first around the house, then to the letter box, then to the end of the street. By about five months in, I was able to go for a proper walk with the dog, and I knew if I took it easy, I could go back to work.

When I was better, I flew to London to give things another go with my ex boyfriend, Nathan – he’d come to visit me while I was recuperating in Australia and the spark was still there. I’ve been in London for a year now and I’m almost back to normal. I no longer teach full time, but I’m working for an agency recruiting foreign teachers and placing them in schools. I don’t go out much anymore; I stay home, chill out and watch TV, or I go to the gym and do yoga. I’ve learned to relax, and I make sure I get eight hours sleep a night. Sometimes I feel like an old grandma because I’m going to bed at 10pm, and I miss the old me, but Nathan tells me, ‘Look at it as a good thing, you’ve grown up.’ And he’s right. We work and we have nice meals together, we travel, we live differently. I don’t need that party lifestyle anymore.” ■

AS TOLD TO AOIFE STUART-MADGE. PHOTOGRAPH GETTY IMAGES