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The Handbag and Wellies Yoga Club

Lucy Edge

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Extract

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'Do not search for him, he will find you'

It was little wonder that I didn't find my man until I was forty-one. I was born a working girl, the best part of my childhood dedicated to building my career. As a nine-year-old my full schedule left little time for thinking about boys; I started the day with careful preparations appropriate to a secretary of my stature – selecting an outfit from my mother's wardrobe, making up my face, deliberating over the shoes – never the right pair. I spent my days answering the black Bakelite phone on my desk – 'Mr Baker is too busy to speak to you now. May I take a message?' – rearranging the notepads and pens I'd stolen from my father's office, taking dictation, choosing Mr Baker's new car for him as he was too busy to do it himself – it was always what I termed a 'honeybee' convertible – sometimes a Triumph Herald, but usually an MG Midget. The next thirty years played out pretty much as intended, except that I got to be Mr Baker.

My parents divorced when I was twelve and, as other children played outside the window, I spent a year hibernating in my bedroom seeking refuge in other worlds – my favourite book was Monica Dickens' *My Turn to Make the*

Tea about life as a trainee journalist – and I loved glossy magazines like *Honey*, *19* and *Look Now*. By the time I'd graduated to *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* I'd settled on a career in advertising. Exactly what I would do in that world was by the by – the important thing was to be there, living a life inside those glamorous pictures had to beat lying on my Laura Ashley eiderdown reading about them. I toyed with a job in media buying – counting the number of pages of magazine advertising versus editorial content – then lines like 'Smitty did it', 'Fry's Turkish Delight… full of Eastern promise', and 'It's kind of new, kind of WOW – Charlie!' led me to consider life as a copywriter. I'd ask Mum for large sheets of paper so that I could lay out 'glass shattering' ads for Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's black bondage suits.

Whatever the specifics of the job it was clear to me that I would need to move from the sleepy Essex village in which I grew up to London. All happiness lay in London. Sitting amongst the flowerpots on my stepmother Nikki's roof terrace I looked out over the streets of Fulham and determined that I would soon have my own open-plan sitting room, chocolate corduroy sofa and heated rollers.

By twenty-four I was a strategist at a top-ten ad agency on St Martin's Lane – now the site of the St Martin's Hotel (it tickles me that my then maroon and grey office is now a £300-a-night baroque bedroom with interactive light display). Imagine the thrill of working in the same building as the men who invented 'only the crumbliest flakiest chocolate tastes like chocolate never tasted before' and 'all because the lady loves Milk Tray', even if the ad I was working on was for McDonald's Neasden drive-thru. No matter, I was

making money and, seduced by Paula Hamilton in that seminal 1987 VW ad, in time I bought the Golf convertible, the pearls, and the red bouclé wool suit with gilt buttons. I remained very single but I told myself, and my mum, that the mews house and the engagement ring would come later.

My life didn't revolve around marriage and children – in fact there were no children around. My brothers and sisters were all still at school or university, and my friends and I were taking time to find our places in the world. We were big kids in shoulder pads – life was about working, shopping, drinking and having fun, it was not about raising a family. When I stopped to think about it – which was never for very long – I couldn't imagine life as my mother. She had me at twenty-two – at that age I was staying late to check my secretary's typing or to run acetates through the photocopier. At thirty, when I was living on cigarettes and canapés, she was cooking for a family. By thirty-five, when I first toted a mobile the size of a brick around the wine bars of London, confessing details of my illicit office liaisons to friends and discussing the emerging World Wide Web with work colleagues, she'd divorced, remarried and acquired two stepchildren.

For a long time advertising's rewards were comparable to those of a good marriage – and a solid replacement for it – offering companionship and security, and as a **50% Extra!** bonus, challenging strategic problems concerning the fate of cartoon characters such as the Jolly Green Giant and the Vitalite singing sunflower. But there was an unfortunate side effect – as I progressed up the corporate ladder my love life slid down it. Where once, in my twenties, there'd been a lightness of touch in my office affairs (the odd snog and

fumble behind the maroon and grey filing cabinet), by my thirties they were tarnished by the tinge of desperation. I might've dreamed of hand-held walks on Hampstead Heath, of returning to our house off the high street for tea and toast before a blazing fire, but my love life was, in the parlance of the time, 'a Gobi Desert'. My radar became increasingly attuned to emotionally unavailable men and I spent the few dates I did have feeling like someone catching a glimpse of what lay inside the cupboard of love but having the door slammed in my face before I could reach in and grab it. Instead of walking gracefully away, grateful to know what any viewer of *Sex and the City* understood beyond all reasonable doubt – that the only explanation for a man not asking you out, not wanting to come in for 'coffee', or not calling after a date, was that he wasn't 'that into you' – I'd get out an extra big chisel and try to prise the door open again.

My boss joked that my appalling love life was good for the company because I worked harder when I was in Man Misery. I blocked not having children out of my mind because they seemed to be a secondary problem – without a man they were never within reach. I didn't feel like I had any choice in the matter – but in reality it was what has been described by others as 'a creeping non-choice'. Focused on my career, Man Misery casting a long shadow over my desk, the possibility of a child felt so far away from me I just ignored it; so like all things ignored, it slunk away.

By the time I got to thirty-seven the career that had sustained me had burned me out. I was a group head in charge of a team of twelve, covering my own accounts and maternity leave for two other women. I didn't want to say no to the opportunity that I had worked so long to open up

but I felt resentful towards these women – both of whom were on their third child. I picked up the slack but in so doing lost all sense of what was important in life.

Like the spinsters of the post-war years I was beginning to feel like a 'Surplus Woman'; without a place in the world I became brittle and increasingly isolated. I longed for someone to talk to, but work left me exhausted and with little time for friends. I was running on empty – I suspected no one would want to know me if they knew me well. Feeling that the friends I still had couldn't bear the weight of the way I felt I gave up, feigning happiness when I saw them, which was rarely. Like once big shiny balloons they gradually shrivelled away. I still got invited to the headline news – births, deaths and marriages – but I was no longer sharing the details of everyday life, the details in which I cried and wondered who I was.

I became addicted to American shows in which women met regularly, laughed and loved – I wanted to live on the set of *Friends,* and though I would never have admitted it in public, I envied Ally McBeal and the comfort of her always cheerful, sometimes fierce flatmate Renee. I longed for the quick-fire backchat of the *Sex and the City* girls, but mostly for the solidity of their friendship, the late-night phone calls, and the morning-after-the-night-before brunches.

My stepmother Nikki, who saw the mess I was in when I blubbed into my soup one evening, gently suggested that I might find yoga helpful, but it took the end of another barely off-the-ground relationship and a holiday in Tobago to persuade me to hit the sticky mat. There I witnessed a fellow holidaymaker spending the afternoons basking by the pool in a yellow bikini and baseball hat, quietly reading a yoga

manual, and the early evening on the hotel lawn making bendy shapes with her pretzel-like body. Her graceful, soft yogic actions exuded peaceful vibrations that could be felt the world over and cast an unearthly spell over the male guests who ordered endless rum punches just to remain in her vicinity, and sat mesmerised, seemingly unable to speak or move. By the end of the holiday she had a boyfriend, and I had the name of her yoga teacher in London: Simon Low.

And so began the slow climb out of the hole that had become my life. Regular attendance at Simon's classes gradually lifted the albatross from my shoulders and helped me to peel back the layers of unhappiness, showing glimmers of something shiny and new – a gentle place where contentment might lie, a place where I could stop the striving, find out what would make me truly happy. Then there were the people I met along the way, especially the girls from that holiday in Spain; we were united in our unofficial quest – to peel back the layers that kept us from full expression of our best selves – and I finally stopped faking it. I had the friendships I longed for and together, the yoga girls I now knew collectively as The Cappuccino Gurus, helped me to confront the truth – advertising may have paid for the holidays and a steady stream of honeybee cars, but it wasn't nurturing my soul. Together we agreed that I needed to take a break from my career – take the maternity leave I needed to look after my own inner child. I took off for India and spent six months trailing round yoga schools, ashrams and eco-friendly villages with a shopping list consisting of the following:

Mystic Indian guru
Tantric bliss/sexual encounters

Pretzel-like body, flexible yet strong
Steady boyfriend, into yoga

Looking back on it I had a rather romantic notion that somehow, if I gave up my flat and my job, 'the universe' would provide the answers. This was a comforting thought, one that I shared with several single friends; I think our vague notions of the universe looking out for us and answering all the big and important questions on our behalves helped us believe we weren't alone. I placed my faith in its power to pick me up, guide me around India and settle me back down in the 'right' place, a place in which I would discover a new improved life. What I discovered was that the universe was not an 'other' thing; that I was very much part of it and as such, although it might help me along, ultimately I needed to take responsibility for myself. Suffice it to say, returning to London, I hadn't found any of the items on my shopping list but I was content to have discovered my Inner Guru – the teacher we all have inside us, the one with infinite wisdom, the one that believes *who* we are being comes before *what* we are doing or *what* we have. One problem. The Inner Guru turned out to be somewhat unreliable.

I tried a job in qualitative research but arriving in Manchester at five in the evening with the prospect of six hours of group discussions ahead of me, and the thought of The Cappuccino Gurus heading off to Manna without me, made me want to cry. No matter that I would be talking to normal people about their views on ads featuring a talking volcano or a new campaign to recruit maths teachers. No matter that I sat in a comfy Ikea-furnished sitting room in front of a huge pile of Marks & Spencer sandwiches and

chocolate roasted peanuts. No matter that I returned to a boutique hotel at the end of the night, could order what I liked from room service, could lie comatose before a huge plasma screen TV, propped up by huge fluffy pillows. I took my mat with me but a glass of Pinot Grigio often won out over practising yoga with my feet pressed against the wardrobe and my nose tickled by dust under the bed.

I left research but unfortunately I still needed to pay the bills so, despite having cleansed my soul in the Ganges, I ended up back in advertising. At least I wouldn't have to work nights in Sheffield, I reasoned with myself as I got on the Tube with lead in my heart. I started off spending several weeks admiring the sparkling homes of premium dishwasher tablet users in the name of strategic development, and then I spent eighteen months Saving the World from Germs. I learned a lot about germs – although knowing that the cold germ can live on a door knob or a table for up to five days had me well on the road to developing a compulsive obsessive disorder – all I can say is, never touch the hotel remote control – worse, much, much worse, than dipping into the communal peanuts at the bar.

To my great surprise I really enjoyed working in an agency again, in part because the work was interesting, in part because the people were bright and, in the main, didn't take themselves too seriously, in part because I got to travel a lot, and in part because something inside of me had shifted. I'd learned from the so-called ordinary people I'd met in India that it was less about *doing* yoga – wearing a spiritual badge that implied certain lifestyle choices, including a predilection for green tea – and more about *being* yoga – seeing it as an aid to living, a way of living harmoniously with

myself and other people. While I couldn't promise to *be* yoga all the time, or even some of it, I did want to try to increase the moments of seeing clearly and choosing wisely in everyday life, and that strategy seemed to work. I found a new appreciation for the small stuff – a frothy chocolate-topped cappuccino from the agency café, the global account director's 24/7 presence at the end of his BlackBerry whichever time zone he was in, the water cooler conversations regarding the previous night's episode of *The Office*.

I made the time to write and I loved sitting at my desk looking out of the French windows onto a balcony with views over a communal garden in which children played. The South Hampstead flat was only a few minutes' drive from Triyoga and aside from Thursday nights with The Cappuccino Gurus mostly I did my own yoga practice at home, 'upside downing' at sunset, just like the so-called ordinary Indians I'd met along the way. I felt more settled and happier than I'd been for years.

The one blot on the landscape was my Inner Guru's Male Toxin Radar, which was still suffering a serious malfunction. I'd met Mr Denmark in Chennai – he was a friend of one of my fellow students and he was hot. Hot. Hot. Hot. There was more than six foot of his strong tanned body, he had wide-set cornflower blue eyes and thick blond hair. I fell immediately in lust. I spent a long time convinced that he was The One – due to some unfortunate coincidences detailed in the Vedic astrology reading I'd had with Mrs P in Rishikesh.

Mrs P had said that I would meet a man 'into yoga and spiritual things'. Check: Mr Denmark was setting up a yoga centre in Copenhagen and counted Deepak Chopra amongst his closest friends.

Mrs P told me, 'He is not like you – he is older or not from your caste or not English.' Check.

Mrs P warned me, 'Do not search for him. He will find you.' Check. He'd found me on the beach in Mahabalipuram. It'd been, at least in my mind, a scene stolen from the movie *From Here to Eternity*, the surf rolling over us as we frolicked on the sand.

Mrs P said it would be a 'Love marriage. Good marriage.' This is where the prediction started to break down. Right after we'd finished playing Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr on the beach he'd told me, over a bottle of Tiger beer, 'I want a wife and family but I have issues around female dependency – my mother had a mental breakdown when I was seven and she was in hospital for a long time. Since then I am always the one to leave women.'

I should have jumped up there and then, wrapped myself in my sarong and run for the hills because, of course, he did leave. Some months later I spent a weekend with him in Copenhagen – I imagined us walking hand in hand, taking in the sights – the Tivoli Gardens, the Little Mermaid, the Viking Ship Museum… The reality was a little different. Mr Denmark drunkenly dumped me in a bar somewhere in the snow-bound city. I had no idea how to get back to his flat – which I wouldn't have bothered doing except that my passport was there. The next morning I got on the first plane home.

The Inner Guru really should have paid more attention to the small print of Mrs P's predictions – she'd told me I would meet The One after 17 February. I'd met Mr Denmark on 8 February. At the time I dismissed this as a small blockage in the cosmic information stream but clearly

I should've known better – Mrs P's 'black tongue' could speak no wrong.

I joined an old-fashioned matchmaking company and spent £400 on the privilege of one date – apparently no one else was compatible. 'You're at the top end of the acceptable age bracket – most of our gentlemen are looking for a woman in her twenties or early thirties.' He and I met at the Dorchester for a drink. He had oily fish eyes, more dependence on alcohol than even I could tolerate, and he was twenty years older than me. I told him I was going to the loo and jumped on a bus home.

Gabriele introduced me to a lawyer. I put his slow courtship – involving flowers and chaste kisses on the cheek – down to the fact that he was a perfect gentleman. Frankly I couldn't understand how we could get on so well and he could keep his hands off me until I heard, six months after I gave up on him, that he was gay.

By this point I had lost all faith in my Inner Guru Male Toxin Radar so I was quite happy to let Poppy's Inner Guru do the work – she wanted to introduce me to David, whom she'd met on another yoga holiday in Spain. She kept it low key, telling me she 'just thought we'd get on' and so, without worrying about it too much (something of a first for me), I agreed to meet him.

We arranged to go as a group to Ronnie Scott's in Soho where our friend Frances Ruffelle (a Tony award winner whom we'd met on another yoga holiday) was performing her favourite jazz standards and torch songs with the BBC Big Band. We'd celebrate Gabriele's birthday and I'd meet David. All well and good, until a couple of weeks before the gig I bumped into David at a Primrose Hill party. A cross

between José Mourinho and the news reader George Alagiah, he had me at 'hello'. I sidled over to sit next to him but, when ten minutes later, he hadn't dropped everything to talk to me, I lost interest and left in a huff. I informed Poppy that I would be taking another man to Ronnie Scott's. She told me I should give David the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he'd been distracted by something, but my Inner Guru was resolute. No dice. He'd blown it.

Finally, in the queue to get into Ronnie Scott's with John, my replacement date, by my side, the Inner Guru spoke the first words of truth it had ever managed concerning men.

'You should be with him,' it said, sagely pointing at David.

Bloody hell. Now you tell me.

Fortunately John left early, citing depression and a headache. If David had been rude to me before he wasn't now – his manners were impeccable – he talked to me all evening (apart from when I was listening to John the Depressed), kept the champagne flowing all night and paid the bill at the end. Best of all, being of Indian extraction and into yoga he was one of the few people I could talk to about my trip round India without boring them to death. At the after-show party we found a quiet corner and exchanged 'how I got to where I am today' stories – he understood immediately the Inner Guru and her malfunctions, and even confessed to having had the odd malfunction of his own. He turned out to live round the corner from me in West Hampstead; only I could travel round India in search of a man only to find him ten minutes from home.

He rang me three days later, days that seemed to stretch into an eternity, and picked me up the following

evening, opening the car door for me, driving to a candlelit Mayfair restaurant, paying for dinner and driving me home. I loved being out with him – an intelligent, handsome, confident, successful, grown-up man who called me 'Babe' – it might've been an old-school phrase but who cared? It made me feel young and sexy. I'd sit and look at him across the table, unable to believe my luck – his light brown skin glowing in the candlelight, his salt and pepper chest hair curling out of the top of his perfectly cut shirt. We talked about his business – an events marketing company – about my tour of India, about how life should be lived, and about yoga – debating the merits of Ashtanga (his choice) and vinyasa flow (mine).

I'd soon fallen for his sense of fun, his boundless energy for life and the way he came up with hundreds of ideas – often in one sitting. There was always a new project, a new scheme, a new way of thinking about a problem. He reminded me of that Kate Bush song 'The Man with the Child in his Eyes'; he had a child's endless enthusiasm and easy positivity, and when it was directed at me I felt I could do anything I wanted to do. I soon knew that life with this man would always be an adventure, and I found myself wanting to be there, by his side.

Much as I loved being out with him I loved being in the flat with him even more – his chest soon became my favourite place to rest my head and we spent many an evening on the sofa watching old films, lying together we were a perfect fit – as he said, 'you couldn't slide a piece of paper between us'.

Although our relationship had an air of inevitability about it from day one – several people at Frances's after-show party

asked us how long we had been together – there were a number of what David politely termed 'considerations'. It turned out that we'd both built up some hard-to-lose habits in our combined years on this planet. Being with David wasn't always easy (and of course, he'd say the same about me) – he had such strong opinions on everything from yoga teachers and clothes to style and politics, just staying in the conversation could be a challenge – but as my mother said on meeting him, 'at least life will never be dull, dear'. Actually we disagreed about pretty much everything – what to eat, what to drink, what to watch on TV, how to drive, how to clean, how to cook, how to wash up – it could be exhausting, but when push came to shove, when I sunk into the heart of me he was there too, another root of the same tree.

We did, however, agree that it was time to buy a place together. We also agreed that it would need to be in a safe area and not be the size of a shoebox. There followed various ill-advised forays into unfamiliar territories – culminating in a dingy house on an A road with no central heating, few unbroken floorboards and walls that divided all of the windows in two. Its current owner had been renting out rooms as bedsits.

'It might be very useful to have a basin in every room,' I suggested.

'No, Babe,' said David firmly.