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Opening Extract from...

Ready or Not?

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1

What was there left to do but call the wedding off?

As my fiancé Ed stood on the doorstep in the early hours of the morning one Sunday early last February, I fancied I could see a dream flying away behind him. Almost twelve months of planning, 150 RSVPs, thousands of pounds already laid out on booking the venue, the caterers, the ceilidh band . . . But as I looked at him right then there was no way I was going to be able to walk down that aisle to stand beside him.

'Heidi, I lost my key,' he said.

It wasn't the only thing he'd lost that weekend.

'Ed,' I sighed. 'Where are your clothes?'

When I was younger, struggling hopefully with a series of brief and hopeless relationships, I heard all the clichés. After each uniquely painful break-up my family and friends would rally round and utter such gems of advice as 'Love will only come when you're not looking for it' and 'You'll find love where you least expect it'. I hated to hear those things. But the fact is that love did come when I wasn't looking for it and it certainly wasn't where I expected to find it.

'So, you'll need to book another appointment as soon as possible to have that temporary filling replaced,' said the dentist. 'And, er, I wonder whether you'd like to come to the theatre next Thursday night.'

Yes. That was how I met him. I lost half a tooth at a friend's dinner party, accidentally crunching on a stray olive stone in

the puttanesca sauce, and Ed Gordon was the emergency dentist who patched me up. He was a locum at the time, standing in for my usual dentist, Mr Orpington. Mr Orpington was a fifty-something whose yellowing pegs and bad breath were far from the best advertisement for his profession. Ed Gordon had the straight, white grin of a Hollywood film star, though I'd find out later on that his front two teeth were a bridge to replace the two he lost to rugby.

'It's just that I noticed you reading the theatre brochure in the waiting room and I've got a spare ticket to see *An Inspector Calls*,' Ed explained.

It would be a few months before I admitted that I only picked up the theatre brochure because the single tattered copy of *Hello* was an issue I already owned. 'Er,' I replied. 'Isn't it against the rules to go on a date with a patient?'

'But you're not my patient,' said Ed. 'Not really. And I promise never to go near your mouth again. At least, not with a drill bit . . .' He grinned at me like a naughty schoolboy who thinks he might have got away with something wicked.

'I'd love to come,' I told him. 'I think.'

After all, any man who asked me out having seen my crumbling molars had to be a pretty genuine sort of bloke. Not overly concerned with looks, at least. Or perhaps he was just as desperate as I was.

Needless to say, our first date went wonderfully. Ed greeted me in the lobby of the theatre with a single, perfect rose. I spent the entire performance sneaking glimpses at his impressively masculine profile in the semi-darkness and being very pleased he was much more handsome than I remembered. We followed up on that theatre date with a Saturday afternoon at London Zoo, then a day at the races and, three weeks later, we spent our first whole night together – a weekend in a posh hotel in Brighton that was as romantic as it was dirty. And almost

two years after that fateful filling Ed Gordon finally proposed. Valentine's Day. Paris. Top of the Eiffel Tower. The most perfect cliché in the world. We saw four more proposals while we waited for the lift to take us down again and one of the girls actually fainted. I felt pretty giddy myself.

We spent the rest of that weekend in Paris on a high, floating around like a pair of teenagers, holding hands and periodically congratulating ourselves on our good fortune in having found each other in a world full of so many strangers. On our last night in France we climbed up to the gardens in front of the Sacré-Cœur and looked back across the city towards the sparkling Tower, where the defining moment of our lives so far had taken place.

'How did you know it was me?' I asked Ed then. 'How did you know I was "The One" for you?'

It wasn't the way I looked, or the way I talked. It wasn't the way my nose wrinkled up when I giggled (which it doesn't). It wasn't my way with a baking tin or my incredible skill in the sack. It was the way I packed my suitcase.

'Your ability to travel light,' was at the top of Ed's well-considered list of reasons why he loved me. 'The fact that you can get out of the house in less than five minutes whether we're going to the supermarket or a black-tie ball, and the way that you cook scrambled eggs.'

Strange as it may sound, I wasn't disappointed with that answer.

'And I love you,' I told him, 'because you always warn me when you're going to fart in bed.'

We set the date for sixteen months after the proposal. Ed had some relatives in Australia and was keen for them to be able to attend, while I wanted plenty of time to make sure our big day was a suitably fantastic expression of our love. Before Ed asked me to marry him, I would have sworn I wasn't interested

in the extravagant white wedding thing: registry office on the King's Road or a cheesy Elvis chapel in Las Vegas would have been good enough for me. The only guests I needed were my parents, my best friend Kara and my younger brother James . . .

After the proposal, I turned into Bride-zilla. I told myself I was only doing it for my family, but I discovered that I secretly wanted a church. I wanted a white dress. I wanted bridesmaids. I wanted small boys dressed as Little Lord Fauntleroy (my younger brother was very lucky he had just turned twenty-five). And as the date grew nearer, every spare moment seemed to be taken up with finalising details: dresses, flowers, table decorations. Food suitable for just about every allergy known to the medical profession – peanuts, dairy, *tomato pips* for goodness' sake. It was stressful beyond belief, but I thought I had every eventuality covered.

Then, with just four months left to go, Ed went and lost his trousers. And his jacket. And his T-shirt. And his pants.

'What the hell happened to you?' I asked him.

'I fell asleep,' he said. 'So they punished me.'

'They' being the other members of Ed's amateur rugby club.

That weekend the club had hired a minibus and driven from London to Gloucester to play a few friendly matches there. They celebrated a weekend of wins with the traditional combination of a curry, drinking games and dirty songs. Unfortunately for Ed – and for me, as it turned out – that year's captain, Richard (orthopaedic surgeon on working days and lunatic on Saturdays), decided to introduce a new weekend-away tradition, imported from his posh Oxford college. The first man to pass out through fatigue or too much alcohol forfeited his clothes. And in their place, the unlucky sucker got a fine layer of sticky black treacle and feathers.

Ed was the first man to pass out.

'You're not coming in till I've put down some newspaper,' I shrieked as he tried to step inside.

'But Heidi, I'm cold,' Ed said pathetically.

'Serves you right.' It was two degrees below outside and I was in no mood to be kind, still smarting from a spat about place settings we'd had before Ed left on the Friday night.

I laid a trail of old Sunday supplements from the front door to the bathroom. 'Why on earth do you have to hang out with such perverts?' I asked as I surveyed the damage. Ed's teammates had sensibly driven off at high speed after depositing him and a plastic carrier bag of suspiciously wet clothes in my care. 'This is never going to come off.' He was covered from ankles to ears. Ed grimaced manfully as I pulled away the first handful of feathers and half his leg hair. Half an hour later, we had to resort to shaving the damn treacle away with *my* Gillette Venus ladies' razor.

'I'm cancelling the wedding,' I said.

'You won't, will you, Heidi? You know how much I love you,' Ed slurred.

'Well, I don't love you any more. You're supposed to be a bloody grown-up. How could you let them do this to you? I'm calling the caterers tomorrow.'

'Heidi, please don't do that. You've got to marry me; I've told all my friends.'

'The same friends that covered you in this mess?' I ran my hands through my hair in exasperation and immediately regretted it. The treacle was getting everywhere. The newspaper hadn't protected the carpet at all and there were three sticky handprints on the bathroom wall where Ed had reached out to steady himself. 'If any one of those jokers actually turns up to the wedding, I will cut off his balls with the cake knife.'

'I love you most because you always have such a calm reaction to disasters,' Ed told me with a burp. 'I can't wait till you're my wife.'

'But I am never going to marry you, Ed Gordon,' I said flatly.

It felt like I was only half-joking.

2

Treacle notwithstanding, to anyone looking in from the outside, my life was pretty much perfect at that moment in time. Not only was I about to get married to a wonderful man, I was one of the rare people I knew who didn't dread Monday mornings; work was going very well.

I joined the BBC as soon as I left college, using my university radio experience to wangle a place on their graduate trainee course. At the end of my training, I was given a placement at Radio Four. After that, I followed the usual path, from lowly 'meeter and greeter' – making tea and coffee for guests on the show – to broadcast assistant to assistant producer to full-blown producer with a desk of my own and a PC I didn't have to share. Well, not often.

Just before Ed's Eiffel Tower proposal, I was headhunted to co-produce a new general interest show on an independent station. The show was to be called *Let's Talk London*. I knew that the station, London Talk Live, didn't have a fraction of Radio Four's listening figures, but something convinced me it might be the right moment to take a leap into the independent-radio unknown. You see, though I had been steadily creeping up through the ranks in the BBC, there were still some people at the corporation who refused to see me as anything other than the work-experience girl I had been when they first met me. I had a feeling my glass ceiling was looming. In fact, I had a feeling I was already smearing that glass ceiling with my Aveda styling serum. I took the new position.

Let's Talk London was great fun from the very beginning. The new gang all started on the same day, which really helped foster team spirit. We were all enthusiastic and hardworking and were soon putting together a show that was gradually, by word of mouth, becoming *the* morning talk show to listen to in the capital city: I knew we had made it when I got into a cab one day after work and noticed that the cabbie's radio was already tuned into my station. When he struck up a conversation about an item that I had produced a couple of days before, proving that he hadn't just tuned in to London Talk Live accidentally, I could have kissed him.

It was a very fast-moving job. The hour-long show went out live three mornings a week and there was rarely any time to congratulate ourselves on a particularly good one before we had to start all over again on another. As soon as each show ended, we would have a meeting to discuss what should feature on the next edition and launch straight into finding the guests who could offer an expert opinion. Sometimes the issues we confronted were serious, sometimes far from it. During my time on the show, *Let's Talk London* had covered everything from the war in Iraq to the threatened demise of Heinz salad cream. Everyone from pop stars to freedom fighters to a man who had been arrested twenty-seven times while attempting to break the world record for visiting every Tube station on the London Underground naked had walked through those studio doors. And yes, Mr Underground came naked to the studio, too – an even less appealing sight than my fiancé in treacle and feathers.

A few days after Ed's rugby-club debacle, a new government study into single parenting was released. The statistics were astonishing: it seemed there were hardly any children with two parents any more. Britain, however, was still largely geared towards catering for a nuclear family that hadn't existed since

the end of the Cold War. Single parents were expected to go out to work and yet there was little childcare provision to help them juggle jobs and homelife. Those few childcare places that did exist were so expensive the gap between money earned and money spent, in order to be *able* to earn, had shrunk to such an extent it hardly seemed worth leaving the house in the morning anyway. Every newspaper, from the tabloids to the broadsheets, had covered the study and the dilemmas it revealed. It was front-page news pending the next Premier League footballer's indiscretion or former royal butler's revelation. We really couldn't afford not to cover it ourselves.

'What we need,' said Eleanor, the show's editor and my boss, 'is something that examines single parenting from a new angle.'

I have no doubt that exactly the same conversation was being had in fifty independent-radio production offices throughout the country that afternoon.

'Single mothers: what kind of shoes do they wear?' asked Robin, the office funny boy. It was a running joke that Robin would include shoes in every proposal he made at the programme meetings. Apparently it was all we girls ever talked about. Manolos, Jimmy Choos, or, more realistically on our wages, Dolcis and Ravel.

'A *sensible* new angle,' said Flo, the show's beautiful presenter. She always tried to be stern with Robin but a smile was never far from her lips when she spoke to him. In some ways Robin used his boyish good looks around our oestrogen-filled office like a male version of a buxom girl flashing her cleavage on a City trading floor. He could make Flo flirt like a teen, though she was old enough to be his mother. At least, I assumed Flo was old enough to be his mother. She had a very mature CV but her soft black skin was still as smooth and shiny as a wet pebble and she laughed like someone who had never been let down.

'Everyone assumes that a single parent is a mother left by a feckless man,' piped up Nelly, our other trainee. If Robin was class clown, then Nelly was definitely class swot. 'But what about a *father* bringing up the kids on his own?' She pushed her glasses further up her nose and squinted through them expectantly as she waited for us to respond.

'That sounds good,' I said. If not entirely original, I thought. Still, there were only two flavours of single parent, weren't there?

Eleanor nodded.

'Single fathers and their shoes?' Robin muttered.

We all ignored him.

'Single father works for me,' said Flo.

It would work for me too. That close to lunchtime I just wanted to get out of the office and into Pret A Manger.

'Right. A lone father it is,' said Eleanor, 'pending any better ideas.'

'Single shoes?' said Robin.

We continued to ignore him.

'Nelly, perhaps you should start by ringing some of the single-parent charities,' I suggested.

Nelly, as usual, was way ahead of the game. 'Oh, I already did that,' she said. I caught Robin rolling his eyes. 'I'm waiting to hear from a couple of men who should be available at short notice.'

'Great. Let me know as soon as they get back to you,' said Eleanor.

'Will do.' Nelly made herself a note before going off to fix us some coffee and shine her halo.

Once again, Robin found himself in the humiliating position of researching the shorter, more lightweight part of the show. He was set to finding someone to talk to us about yet another calendar made up of nude pictures of unlikely models. We'd had the naked WI girls, naked footballers, naked firemen,

naked vicars . . . (okay, so that last one I made up). This time the nude models were all professional cyclists raising money for an arthritis charity. Strategically placed bicycle pumps kept us from finding out whether the rumour that cyclists put bananas down their Lycra shorts was true. It was surprisingly disappointing when Robin announced, after some very light research, that it *was* true: cyclists do put bananas in their Lycras. But only the skins. Between their buttocks. To stop chafing.

'Can we use the word "chafing" on our show?' I wondered aloud.

'I'll look it up in the network guidelines,' said Nelly.