



At the advanced age of thirty-two, I've learned enough about the world to have developed a well-established set of personal rules by which I live my life. Here is the first one: The whole concept of a One True Love Who Completes Your Soul is total bullshit.

I don't mean love in general, of course – I love my parents, my sister, a few assorted friends, and Churchill, the English bulldog I had when I was growing up. I'm talking about the fairy-tale, Prince Charming, marriage-as-a-happy-ending, love-at-first-sight kind of thing. As far as I'm concerned, that's a brand of snake oil concocted by the online dating and wedding industries for the sole purpose of bilking millions of unsuspecting women out of their hard-earned money. Maybe it's because I don't have any role models to look to who've actually sustained long-term love, much less successful marriages. My parents, and most of my friends' parents, were of the generation who believed strongly in the power of divorce and remarriage as an alternative to buying a sports car when in the midst of a midlife crisis.

You could call me cynical, or jaded, or even a little bitter, and I wouldn't argue with you. It's not as though I arrived at my philosophy on love when I was thirteen and still thought I was going to marry the lead singer of Duran Duran. No, it took years and years of bad dates, horrible

setups, and one real bastard of an ex-boyfriend for me to come to my senses.

Which is why I never imagined I would meet someone on an airplane. I mean, how random would that be? After all, in real life, lovers are not brought together by a quirk of fate, or by some random act that realigns the universe; most people who get together meet through friends, or work, or something equally mundane. Those syrupy tales of two halves of one heart reuniting are just Hollywood fairy tales, usually starring Meg Ryan, and marketed to women in my age, gender, and marital-status demographic. But I have always refused to buy into the hype, just as I refuse to transform my pin-straight hair into Meg's adorably scruffy, Sally Hershberger-designed coif.

So when I boarded the American Airlines flight from New York to London, my battered old knapsack slung over my shoulder (I never can pull off that glamorous world-traveler look – really, I'm only one small, scary step from completely throwing away my dignity and embracing the butt pack), the last thing I was expecting was romance. In fact, I was fully prepared for a boring, six-hour trip full of bad food and uncomfortable seats, and – if experience was any guide – a small child sitting behind me, screaming the whole way.

I snagged a window seat, and was glad that I only had to share one armrest. I had desperately hoped to get upgraded to business class – that Shangri-la for travelers, with its cushy seats, free drinks, and plentiful armrests – but the same grouchy airline employee who wouldn't give me a seat in the emergency-exit row certainly had no interest whatsoever in upgrading me (he'd been far more accommodating to the Ricky Martin lookalike who'd been ahead of me in line, I'd noted). I was relieved when a middle-aged woman wearing a pashmina shawl and carrying a thick paperback sat in the empty seat next to me.

I usually get seated next to obese men who have personal odor problems and who snore so loudly they actually drown out the roar of the jet engines. This woman tended in the other direction – as thin as a greyhound and marinated in Obsession perfume – but still, a definite improvement. Or so I thought.

Shortly after takeoff, the woman began twisting around to whine to her husband, who was sitting directly behind her, about how her back was hurting her and why couldn't the airlines provide orthopedic pillows, and how could he not have remembered to pack his blue jacket, and why hadn't the airline honored her request to sit next to an empty seat so she could stretch out during the flight, and had she known they were going to stick someone next to her, she would have rather sat with her husband. Considering her tone, her husband's weary answers, and the fact that every time the woman turned around she knocked me in the side with her pointy little elbow, I was starting to suspect that the husband had lucked out by not having to sit next to her. It was probably the first peace and quiet he'd had since marrying her (not that she showed any intention of leaving him alone to enjoy it). On her third go-round, this time lodging a complaint on the too-cold temperature of the airplane, I heard the man sitting behind me offer to trade places with her so that she and her husband could sit together.

'Oh, *thank you*. We would have booked our seats together, but I was supposed to have an empty seat next to me. But then they sat *this woman* here,' she said, her voice laced with self-righteous indignation, as she shot me a dirty look.

I returned her dirty look – a skill I could win a gold medal in – and Mrs Pointy Elbow was properly chastened ... or scared, I actually couldn't tell which, as I've been told that my signature dirty look is quite intimidating. I base it

on a combination of Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* ('You can't handle the truth!') and Hillary Clinton when she thinks no one is watching her, with just a hint of Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry thrown in for some color. In any event, Mrs Pointy Elbow averted her eyes and stopped complaining – for the moment – and turned her attention to collecting her things. It took her a while, a laborious process of gathering her book and newspaper and purse and pillow and blanket together, all while this guy was standing in the aisle, waiting patiently for her to finally clear out of what was now his seat.

To my surprise, the guy was cute, in a scruffy sort of way. I hadn't noticed him in the airport lounge when we were waiting to board, but then he wasn't exactly a head-turner. He was tall and lanky, although not skinny, thank God (I can't deal with men who have thinner thighs than I do). He had a long, angular face, shaggy dark blond hair in need of a trim, and his too-long nose was slightly crooked, as if it had never been properly set after being broken. From the barely noticeable lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes, I guessed his age to be about thirty-six or -seven – definitely on my side of forty. It wasn't until he smiled at the woman as she thanked him for changing seats with her that I was struck by how appealing he was – his smile lit up his whole face, his grin open and genuine, his eyes crinkling pleasantly. And I don't normally go for blond men – there's something too California-ish, too frat-rat about them, too much like Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. But this guy was more Owen Wilson than Sean Penn.

And his considerable height was a definite plus. Men who are shorter than I am face automatic elimination under the rules set forth in the Official Claire Spencer Dating Handbook. It's not that I'm prejudiced against petite men – it's just that the last time I went out with one of them, my date spent the evening saying things like 'Wow, you're a lot

of woman, aren't you,' and then challenged me to an arm-wrestling competition over dinner. Around the time I turned twenty-five – about the same point I stopped slouching in a misguided attempt to appear dainty – I decided that I would no longer date short men, and this policy has saved me an enormous amount of humiliation. Now I only have to deal with my good friend Max Levy, who doesn't reach five foot six in his cowboy boots, and who is always trying to get me to dance with him so that he can act out the scene in *Sixteen Candles* where Long Duck Dong rests his head on the massive bosom of his 'sexy American girlfriend.' Needless to say, I don't find this nearly as funny as he does.

My new seatmate folded his long frame into the seat next to mine, slouching down like a teenager, and, to my complete humiliation, caught me checking him out.

'Looks like we're stuck together,' he said while smiling pleasantly at me.

'Hmmm,' I said, and to cover for my previous ogling, gave him a polite, dismissive smile, before hiding behind my copy of *Elle Decor*.

But he wasn't put off. 'I'm Jack,' he said, holding his hand out sideways.

'Claire,' I replied, taking his hand.

It was awkward to shake hands in the narrow space, but actually I was secretly pleased at the attention. Even though I don't believe in the One True Love thing, I'm not against a little harmless flirting now and then – it's all a matter of controlling your expectations. I did wish that I'd dressed in something a little more glamorous than my favorite jeans and a black turtleneck sweater, and that I'd worn my contact lenses instead of my horn-rimmed glasses, but I'd been hoping to catch a little sleep on the plane, and so had dressed for comfort, not for a date. At least my hair was clean, and freshly blown out, and I was reasonably sure that my makeup was still intact.

Oh God, what am I doing? Don't even think about it, I told myself. I'm sure I'm not his type. He's all preppy and outdoorsy looking, and he probably goes for skinny women who like to run marathons and go camping. Certainly not someone like me.

Because the thing is, I'm big. *Big*. I'm very tall for a woman, five feet ten inches from head to toe, and hardly fall into the current beauty ideal of being Gwyneth Paltrow thin. I'm big all over – big arms, big hands, big feet, big boobs, big hips, and one of my thighs is probably about the same size as Gwynnie's entire body. It's not that I'm fat, really – in fact, through rigorous gym sessions, I'm at a healthy weight, even if I'm not about to go parading around in public in a bikini. And although I've definitely grown to be comfortable with my body – well, more comfortable, anyway – it's still hard to live in a culture where the last two full-figured women to achieve prominence were Monica Lewinsky and Anna Nicole Smith. There are guys out there who have a thing for fuller-figured women, but since there are also fetishists of toe licking and underwear sniffing, this was not necessarily a reassuring thought.

I pretended to go back to reading my magazine, while Jack turned his attention to what looked like paperwork he'd retrieved from his briefcase. It wasn't until the dinner service arrived, and we were offered our choice between a seafood dish of some sort and chicken with pasta, that Jack packed up his files and stuck them in the storage pocket in front of him.

'I think I'll have to go with the chicken. How about you?' he asked.

'Yes, definitely the chicken. Having the salmon would be just asking for food poisoning,' I said.

The flight attendant, who'd been all charm and smiles while handing Jack his dinner tray, shot me a dirty look and plunked my tray down with quite a bit less grace.

‘I think she’s a little sensitive about her salmon,’ Jack said in a mock whisper once the flight attendant had moved on.

‘I don’t know why. It’s not like she cooked it,’ I said.

‘Well, you never know. They might give us the pre-packaged crap back here, but the food in first class is pretty damn good. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a tiny chef up there, slaving away in a tiny kitchen,’ he said.

‘Do you normally fly first class?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, usually. I mostly travel for business, so my company foots the bill.’

‘Well, then, why on earth are you back here in steerage?’

‘Steerage,’ he repeated, and smiled at my joke. He had a disarmingly cheerful grin, warm and open. ‘Actually, I was planning to stay in New York for another couple of days, but I have some things I need to take care of in London, so I caught the first flight back. The only seat they had open was back here. How about you? You come here often?’ Jack asked, his tone irreverent to keep the obvious line from being cheesy.

‘To London, you mean?’

‘No, I meant the steerage cabin. Are you such a fan of their . . . what is this?’ he asked, poking at the mound of red gelatinous goop on his plate. ‘SpaghettiOs with imitation chicken on top?’

‘No, don’t be silly. You only get real SpaghettiOs in first class. This is some kind of a cut-rate pasta product,’ I said. Jack laughed. It was a nice laugh, deep and endearingly goofy.

‘So when you’re not dining on imitation pasta, what are you doing? Do you live in London?’ Jack said.

‘No, New York. I’m going to London for work. I’m a travel writer for a magazine,’ I explained, and then hesitated, as I was enjoying the interest registering on his face. My job – or at least, my job title – always has this effect on people. They assume that I get to jet around to exotic

locales and eat out at swishy restaurants for free, and then have a forum in which to spout off my opinions. Ah, were it only so.

‘Really? Would I have read any of your work?’ Jack asked.

And this is the part where it always gets tricky. Because, in reality, my job is a teensy less glamorous than it initially sounds. I don’t write for *Vogue* or *Gourmet* or even the American Airlines in-flight magazine.

‘I doubt it. I, um, work for a magazine called . . .’ I began, then paused. After three years on the job, I still had a hard time saying it. ‘*Sassy Seniors*.’

Jack’s forehead wrinkled with confusion, and I knew that he had never heard of the magazine. No one ever did.

‘It’s aimed at retirees,’ I explained.

‘So you write articles on how to travel with an oxygen tank, and the best places to eat dinner at three in the afternoon?’

I giggled. I’m not much of a giggler – it’s not an especially attractive habit for an Amazon-sized woman to have – but I couldn’t help myself.

‘Yeah, pretty much. Let’s put it this way – in every piece I write, I have to include information about whether the hotels, restaurants, and attractions have handicap access or senior discounts or early-bird specials,’ I said.

‘Still. I’m an attorney, so I spend all day locked in a high-rise, putting out fires. Getting paid to travel sounds fantastic,’ he said.

‘Well, I suppose it would be, if I ever got to go anywhere interesting. But I don’t get to pick the destinations, and the magazine only sends me to budget-oriented domestic locales, you know, places that seniors can travel to cheaply. San Antonio, Orlando, Minneapolis, cities like that.’

‘And London?’

‘I don’t know how I talked my editor into it, but I did. I told him that the dollar was strong overseas, but honestly,

I'm not even sure what that means,' I admitted. 'What about you? Are you going to London on business?'

'No, I live there. I've been an expat for a few years,' Jack replied.

'Really? My best friend lives there, too. She loves it, although she said that the British aren't always all that friendly to Americans,' I said.

'Yeah, I get a lot of that. Every time politics is brought up, I'm supposed to defend the actions of the American government, not just in the present day, but at every historical turn for the last two hundred years,' Jack said. 'And somehow, no matter what I say, I come off sounding like Kevin Kline in *A Fish Called Wanda*, you know, where he says that without the U.S., England would be the smallest province in the German empire?'

I laughed, and paused for a minute as the flight attendants passed by and picked up our dinner trays. 'How did you end up in London? Do you work for an American law firm there?' I asked.

'No. I used to practice in Manhattan – I was an associate at Clifford Chance – but once the big-firm machine ground me up and spat me out, I moved to an in-house position at British Pharmaceuticals, about eighteen months ago.'

I was suitably impressed. I'd considered going to law school, but got cold feet when I realized that the whole Socratic torture method John Houseman had employed in *The Paper Chase* wasn't just fiction.

'What do you do there?' I asked.

'I head up their legal department,' he said modestly – and contradicting his previous claim that he hadn't done well at his law firm. Clearly, he was highly successful, and just self-effacing about his accomplishments. It was an odd trait to find in an attorney. Most of the lawyers I know, especially the ones who've put in time at the big firms, are usually so impressed with their own credentials and how

important they are, they do everything in their power to make you aware of it.

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘You must be really good to have gotten so far, I mean for a guy your age.’

‘Oh, well, I’m really sixty-two. The Botox injections take years off,’ he said, flashing another grin. ‘So, do you like what you do? Being a writer? I’ve always envied people who have creative jobs.’

‘I don’t know how creative it is. Let’s put it this way – my editor and I have very different visions of what my column should be, and it’s a fight that I rarely win,’ I said.

That was an understatement. When my editor, Robert Wolcik, went over my column, he was so heavy-handed with his red marker that it sometimes looked like the pages of copy were bleeding to death by the time he was done with them. True, my writing style is a little edgy and quirky (although Robert would describe it as ‘strident’ and ‘sarcastic’), but I honestly don’t understand what his problem is. I include all of the pertinent information about early-bird specials and hotel package deals. I just also like to poke a little fun at the destination I’m writing about. Robert doesn’t tolerate my color commentary; he wants the column to be a bare-bones listing of hotels, restaurants, and attractions. Boring, boring, boring.

‘Let me put it this way – as part of my job, I actually had to visit a museum devoted entirely to Dr Pepper, and I couldn’t even point out the absurdity of it all,’ I explained. ‘Not even in a good-natured, campy way.’

‘There’s a museum devoted to Dr Pepper?’ Jack asked in disbelief.

I nodded. ‘In Waco, Texas. And strangely enough, touring it is more fun than you might think,’ I said.

‘So, if this isn’t your dream job, what is?’ Jack asked, managing not to sound like an interviewer at a college admissions office.

I thought about it for a minute. 'I'd still be a writer, but I'd have a column at an edgier magazine with a younger, hipper readership, I guess. And I'd have complete control over my content,' I said. 'What about you? Or do you already have your dream job?'

'I don't know how many kids daydream about one day growing up and being a corporate attorney. No, when I was younger, I wanted to be an artist,' Jack said. 'In fact, I took a year off before going to law school, and spent it in Florence, pretending to be an artist.'

'Really?' I asked. As petty as it might make me, I hate hearing stories like this – people striving for their dreams, taking risks, grabbing for the brass ring. It made me acutely aware of just how many hours I wasted while in my twenties, vegging out on the couch, watching oddly compelling crap shows like *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210*. 'That's . . . amazing. You must be really good.'

'Nope,' Jack said cheerfully. 'I mostly just did it to pick up girls. It's shocking how many women actually go in for the scruffy starving artist. The only thing I got around to painting was my impression of the Palazzo Vecchio, and it was pretty pathetic.'

'Still, I can't paint at all, well, except for those paint-by-number kits,' I said.

'Are those the ones where you paint the happy tree and the happy sky?' Jack asked.

I laughed. 'No, that was Bob Ross. You know, the guy with the enormous Afro who had that painting show on public television. He was way, way out of my league. All I can paint are depressed trees in need of Prozac,' I said.

We both had our seats reclined back, and were twisted to the side, so that we were facing each other as we talked, discussing everything from the best place to get a hamburger in New York to which Charles Dickens novels we'd suffered through in our college English lit courses. It

was strangely intimate for being in such a public place. Every one around us was sleeping, or watching the in-flight movie, and the cabin was dark and quiet except for the white-noise drone of the engine. The more we talked, the more it felt like we were on an amazing, albeit completely bizarre, first date.

Around the time that the plane was over Scotland and turning south, Jack said, 'In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you something.'

My heart sank. *Here it comes*, I thought. He's going to tell me he has a wife and three kids, or that he's gay but thinking of going straight and wants me to be the guinea pig. Nothing I hadn't suffered through before, of course. I'd gone through my whole life being disappointed by men, having my hopes raised only to have them come crashing back down under the weight of reality, and as a result I was pretty careful not to invest in anyone until I got to know him better (and, let's face it, once I did get to know any of them better, I usually wished I hadn't). I didn't even think I was capable of being smitten with a man on first meeting anymore . . . but Jack had definitely piqued my interest. I liked the way his hair flopped down over his forehead, despite his repeated efforts to push it back, I liked that he smelled of soap and freshly laundered clothes (I can't *stand* the overpowering stench of cologne, and consider it grounds for automatic rejection), and I liked that he didn't take himself too seriously. And I really liked the way he looked at me when I talked, as though he was paying careful attention to everything I said, no matter how banal, and wasn't just waiting for his own turn to speak. So I braced myself for his declaration.

'It's the reason I'm going back to London early. When I said I had something to take care of . . . well, it's personal. There's someone I've been seeing, and . . . I'm going back to break things off with her.'

Argh! I knew it! What were the chances that a thirty-something, attractive, smart, straight, successful guy like Jack would be single? And what was I thinking that someone like me, someone for whom a size six is as much a fantasy as getting together with Russell Crowe (even before he was married), would just happen to stumble across the most eligible bachelor of the year on board an airplane? I just knew the 'girlfriend' Jack was speaking of in such a cavalier way was most likely a 'wife' or a 'live-in,' and when he said he was going to break up with her, that was just code for 'I want to string you along with the fantasy that I'll leave her for you just long enough to get you into bed.'

'Ah,' I said, turning away from Jack for the first time that night to stare into the vast darkness that lay outside my tiny window.

I was surprised when his hand reached out and caught mine. The hard-edged city girl in me should have ripped her hand back and muttered 'Get a life' under her breath. But instead I turned back to look at him, and something in his face stopped me.

'I'm not lying to you. I know it sounds convenient, but it's true. I have a girlfriend, someone I've been seeing for a while, someone I thought that maybe I could . . . but I can't force myself to feel something for her that I don't. I think I've known for a while, but it seemed easier not to face it. I like her, and I figured I wasn't hurting anyone. But then I was talking to her on the phone yesterday, and she started hinting about wanting us to move in together, and I realized that if things keep going as they are, that, well, someone would get hurt. But now that I know I have to end things, I didn't want to wait, so I booked the first flight back to London. I'm going to meet her at her apartment when she gets home from work and tell her then.'

He looked so earnest as he talked, still holding my hand, and running his free hand through his shaggy blond hair.

The moment had a surreal feel – the odd hour, the strange location, holding hands with a relative stranger who seemed oddly familiar. I like to think of myself as having a hard, cynical shell that protects me from false hopes and insincere men, but somehow I believed him. Maybe it was his tone, or the obvious anxiety he was having about breaking things off with this woman.

‘If it makes you feel any better, you’re doing the right thing. I don’t know anyone who would want to stay involved with someone who didn’t return her feelings,’ I said. This was an outright lie – I knew many people, men and women alike, who’d gladly delude themselves into believing that their significant other was committed for life, rather than be confronted with the unpleasant truth that he or she was no longer loved. But since Jack was trying to do the right thing, I didn’t see any reason to make it more difficult for him.

‘I know, I know. Even if I don’t love her, she’s still a great person, and I hate to hurt her. Is it appropriate to bring flowers to someone when you’re breaking up?’ Jack asked.

‘No! When you’re breaking someone’s heart, you never bring a consolation prize! In fact, you should make a good-faith effort to remove your things from her apartment as soon as possible,’ I said. ‘And don’t ever break up in public, just to avoid a scene. It’s a chickenshit way to handle it.’

‘I wasn’t going to do that,’ Jack said, offended. ‘I would never do that.’

I felt vulnerable suddenly, as though I were the one he was about to break up with. I knew it was ridiculous (we had just met, after all), but I could easily imagine what this woman was thinking – looking forward to her boyfriend coming home, planning a romantic reunion. She had no idea that her heart was about to be broken. Here was this great guy whom she cared about, but she wasn’t going to be able to keep him. I felt for her. After all, I was well

acquainted with what it felt like to have your heart shredded.

‘Claire . . . I’d really like to see you again. I know this is a little weird, meeting on a plane and all, but . . .’ he trailed off, and actually looked a little embarrassed.

‘But what?’ I asked.

‘I was going to say I thought there was a connection here, but then you’d just think I was a big dork who sits around watching *Oprah* all the time,’ Jack said.

I laughed. ‘Are you an *Oprah* fan?’

‘You’re avoiding the question.’

He was right – I was. I just didn’t know if I wanted to take a chance on a guy that (a) I met on a plane, and (b) had already admitted that he had a girlfriend. So I stalled. ‘I’m only going to be in London for a few days,’ I said. ‘And . . . there’s the girlfriend thing.’

‘Almost ex-girlfriend,’ he reminded me. ‘What if I break up with her before I ask you out? As I said, I’m going to tell her tonight. I’ll call you afterward, and maybe we can get together before you go back to New York.’

‘Well . . . ask me again afterward,’ I said, not believing for a minute that he would. But really, really wanting him to.

‘I will. I promise you, I will,’ Jack said.