

LETTING GO OF THE GLITZ

The true story
of one woman's
struggle to live
the simple
life in
Chelsea



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Disclaimer This is a true account. However, some names,
identifying characteristics and time sequences have been changed
to protect the guilty.

Edited by Emma Tuck



Prologue

Now the recession has kicked in, I look back to the boom years and wonder, what were we thinking? For many years I, like so many others, was caught up in an extravagant consumer spiral — buying stuff I didn't need, stressing myself out by moving house every year in a constant attempt to trade up the property ladder (oh, the misery!) and taking long-distance holidays that left me more exhausted than if I'd stayed at home. I witnessed those around me working round the clock and falling apart to fund the extravagant, unaffordable lifestyle to which so many of us aspired.

With man-made climate instability the biggest threat facing us, it's timely that popular new movements are reflecting the thrifty *zeitgeist* without even needing to mention words like eco, green or sustainable. We have the mouth-watering Slow Food movement which promotes local food produced in rhythm with the seasons and fair pay for all those involved in the supply chain. Slow Travel eschews the misery of the modern airport and encourages us to enjoy travelling by train, ferry and foot, and to see the journey as part of the holiday.

Letting go of the Glitz

Tom Hodgkinson similarly embraces the joys of slowing down in his politely revolutionary magazine *The Idler* which argues that idleness is eco-friendly and that to save the planet we need to relax and do less. Meanwhile, elusive groups such as the Cloud Appreciation Society and the Lying Around in Fields Society suggest that by being less driven we will be happier and save money in the process. It's a revolution in thinking — after years of being driven to achieve, to acquire, to shop till we dropped, the new wisdom is less is more. Hurrah!

Practising Buddhism for seventeen years has also changed my perspective. As Buddhist philosopher Dr Daisaku Ikeda explains: 'A barren, destructive mind produces a barren, devastated natural environment. The desertification of our planet is created by the desertification of the human spirit.'

Thus living a green life means we have to change from the inside first. Unless we transform our belief systems about what constitutes happiness we will go on grabbing and plundering what we can't afford until both we and the planet are extinguished.

This book is a description of my journey to reach these same conclusions through various incarnations — from sports car driving Stepford wife, married alive in the Surrey suburbs, wrestling with my hostess trolley and incompatible BMW-driving husband, to someone who, fifteen years down the line, is finally happy in her own skin and in a relationship I could only have dreamt of back then.

I took some strange detours along the way.

Attempts to cope with the fallout of my hideous divorce turned me into a frantic spiritual shopper and dolphin botherer *par extraordinaire*, trying to find happiness with feng shui, crystals, ruinously expensive Tony Robbins fire-walking

Prologue

courses and a trip to the Himalayas ‘to find myself’. I ended up with a bright red apartment, a broken heart, burnt feet and dysentery — not to say a depleted bank account and enough carbon emissions to make me hang my head in shame.

Chakras still confused, I threw myself into the heady nineties and the ritzy life of an It-girl. Flashbulbs and champagne corks popped while aristocratic boyfriends came and went. On paper my life looked glamorous but inside I was often heartbroken, racing around chasing my tail, never feeling I fitted in. We live in a world where money, glitz, status and celebrity are seen as prerequisites for happiness but as those who have acquired these baubles of ‘success’ will attest they are no guarantee of contentment. A cliché but true. Sadly, many of us will have to learn through bitter experience that while material benefits are not to be sniffed at, the structure of your life must be sound before you can fully enjoy them.

Truly, I’ve served my time shopping, going to openings of envelopes, endlessly pursuing designer bags on eBay, enduring cultural events in an attempt to appear intellectual, falling in love with unsuitable Porsche-driving men and taking fancy holidays in the sun.

One day I woke up and realised I hate parties, shopping is tiring and boring, Birkin bags are impossibly heavy (and don’t even fit over your shoulder so you can’t keep your hands free), vacations in the sun mean enduring airport hell, and prematurely wrinkled skin and men in fast cars are compensating for inadequacies in other areas (see Chapter 12). Give me a man on a bike any day of the week.

Changing my values and living at a slower pace is a huge relief. Now I get my kicks from writing about the ups and downs of greening my life, fighting and losing elections on

Letting go of the Glitz

behalf of the Green Party and forcibly indoctrinating my long-suffering boyfriend S — a builder not a banker, thank goodness — into the joys of a green life.

He has taken to peeing on the compost heap (it speeds decomposition if you were wondering), making briquettes from old newspapers and chopping wood for our zero-emission wood-burning stove with some enthusiasm — but he still forgets to take off the tops of bottles before recycling (*sacre bleu!*), is yet to wear the cheery Kermit-green hemp boxer shorts foisted on him at Christmas, and retains an unhealthy attachment to a vile diesel-belching white van.

Sometimes, after a particularly enthusiastic lesson on the joys of greenery, his screams can be heard all over Chelsea, but he is sticking with it despite many lapses (as I write he is booking himself an all-you-can-eat-and-drink-for-£199 package holiday in Mexico), but he's a grown man, what can I do?



Chapter 5

The dating jungle

DONNACHADH arrived one freezing morning on a bike. He was a wiry, energetic Irishman with a strong accent which became increasingly impenetrable when he pointed out some outrageous form of eco-wastage in my flat. Here was the real deal — someone who really walked the talk and was devoting his life to improving his patch of the world.

Many people probably feel a bit defensive at the thought of being eco-coached. No one likes the thought of a worthy stranger rifling about in their fridge, bathroom and kitchen cabinets for eco-nasties. It's like some terrible exam which you know you can't possibly pass.

Fortunately Donnachadh is not remotely pious or holier than thou and has a sense of mischief and humour — qualities you definitely need if you're going to be poking around in a stranger's kitchen cupboards.

During my eco-audit Donnachadh boosted me by focusing on the positive. All the organic food went down well (though the Himalayan Goji berries received short shrift). He reminded me that it's better to buy non-organic local rather than long-distance organic — for starters, how do we know what sort of organic standards there are in Peru, for

Letting go of the Glitz

example? Local food is fresher, probably tastes better, supports beleaguered British farmers and has a lower carbon footprint. It just makes sense to eat British food in season.

He awarded me top marks for my waste strategy; indeed when it comes to rubbish I am top of the form. I recycle what I can while all vegetable matter and cardboard is deposited in my worm compost bin, which within months is transformed magically into gorgeous crumbly compost that houseplants adore.

The only trouble is that it takes up too much space on my terrace so I've sneakily dumped it onto my adjoining neighbour's flat roof. He is an elegant, balding banker and I have dreadful visions of my weighty bins collapsing through his roof and landing on his head. I hope I can convince him that a worm toupee is a small price to pay for doing his bit to reduce the nation's waste.

I find the idea of worms transforming kitchen leftovers irresistible and I'm getting delusions of grandeur à la Napoleon. What's to stop me colonising all the unused flat roofs in my terrace and setting up miles of worm factories on them? At this rate I'll turn into the Bernard Matthews of worm farming.

Donnachadh was less keen on my huge Maytag fridge and freezer. It's probably a bit excessive for a single person who hates entertaining. To be fair, the fridge is always quite full — unlike the half-empty deep freeze which he suggested filling with empty cartons and packaging because a full fridge and deep freeze uses less energy, and reduces electricity bills.

Things nosedived further when he came face to face with my Bang and Olufson stereo system that can't be turned off at the mains without the entire system having to be reset and thus must remain on standby at all times. I don't know what made me invest in the whole macho B and O thing. I am not



Chapter 15

Green celebrity hubris

AT ONE time, being green was seen as the dreary province of impoverished, bearded bean-munchers, whereas now it's almost the opposite and there's a danger that living the green life is seen as the province of the rich — an expensive add-on rather than a less glamorous but essential reduction of what we consume. After all, buying organic food, employing swoony ecotects and shelling out for organic cotton clothes are all pricey pursuits.

It's actually very hard to be green and wealthy. The less money you have, the less you buy, the less you travel and you're less likely to run a car. Despite the growth of low-cost flights and cheap imported food there is no getting around the fact that the average wealthy Westerner has a massive carbon footprint while the world's poorest have the least. Even Westerners on low incomes who annually produce about three tonnes per person are emitting the equivalent of about thirty Bangladeshis.

Tom Hodgkinson, editor of *The Idler*, reckons that the habits of the wealthy and their addiction to relentless doing (buying, consuming, travelling) is the prime cause of the world's problems.

Letting go of the Glitz

‘One way to avoid environmental catastrophe’, he writes, ‘would be not to end poverty but to end wealth. It is wealth, not poverty that makes the problems ... This is why I would recommend that every family and individual try to earn and spend less money, not more. Use your imagination to live well on less each year. This way you will consume less and so create less pressure on the world’s resources. Ending global wealth may be the only way out of our predicaments.’

Indeed, if you’re worth a few bob you’re more likely to own several houses, cars, enjoy scores of extravagant holidays a year and travel extensively (in business class, which uses up more space and thus more carbon per person).

If you have the funds you may even be tempted to take a leaf out of John Travolta’s book and buy a few Learjets and turn your garden into a mini-airport — one step further than paving over the front garden so you can park your car. I can’t resist sharing a particularly amusing burst of green celebrity hubris. Mr Travolta, a passionate pilot and owner of a £2 million Boeing 707, three Gulfstream jets and a Learjet, plus his own private runway, has encouraged his fans to ‘do their bit’ to tackle global warming on his website. Clocking up at least 30,000 flying miles in 2007 means he has produced an estimated eight hundred tons of carbon emissions — nearly one hundred times the average Briton’s tally. A classic case of do as I say not as I do!

Other *soi-disant* eco-minded celebs are photographed sipping organic smoothies, extolling the virtues of the Toyota Prius and the importance of switching appliances off at the mains, yet seem oblivious to the fact that their penchant for first-class air travel, alligator skin handbags and shoes (they skin the alligators alive!) and carbon-busting lifestyles undo all their greenie points. In mitigation it is very hard once you’ve got used to a certain lifestyle to give aspects of it up.

"A sparkingly honest, wonderfully posh
and terribly funny read."

PRESS ASSOCIATION

Help! I'm Married Alive!

Julia Stephenson, struggling to cope with life as a Surrey housewife, grimly welded to her electric floor polisher and fed up with her golf-addicted, BMW-driving husband, bolts to the fleshpots of London.

Here she forges a new life as single girl about town in her Chelsea eyrie, a short walk from Peter Jones. Bemused to find herself an 'It-girl' life soon becomes a ritzy blur of parties, popping corks and flashbulbs, while handsome aristocratic boyfriends come and go.

Realising she isn't cut out for this she reinvents herself as a *femme serieuse* representing the Green Party at the general election and begins to convert her flat into the first carbon-neutral dwelling in Sloane Square. Giving up her usual dating fodder of Old Etonians and bankers she embarks on a tempestuous love affair with her builder.

Who wants to be driven around in a Porsche when you can be ferried about in a spacious white van that runs on waste cooking oil?

Life is so much better in every way when you let go of the glitz ...

"A fascinating and hilarious insight into a party girl turned green goddess."

SHE MAGAZINE

JULIA STEPHENSON, is the author of *Pandora's Diamond* and *Chalet Tiara*. She lives in Chelsea where she works inconsistently as a freelance writer while her boyfriend re-builds her flat. The work has been going on some time now. During her free time she can be found in the recovery position.



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