

[Adventures in Bargain Shopping]

KNOCK ON

The quest for the perfect fake By Chandra R. Thomas

THERE'S SOMETHING EXHILARATING ABOUT having the *right* designer purse on your arm as you stroll through this oh-so-label-conscious city. But, on my budget, designer-bag price tags are reserved for things like mortgage payments and summer vacations.

So, enticed by rumors of dirt-cheap bounty, a friend and I set off to a row of Buford Highway warehouses, the alleged source of street vendors and small-time wholesalers and retailers. The warehouses, with obscure names like Happy Land and One Trading, were packed with everything from luggage and backpacks to faux designer watches and bed sheets. The scent of vinyl and plastic hung heavy in the air as we perused rows and rows of purses stacked high atop brown cardboard boxes. We were disappointed by the selection—"Pradas" with the word "Prince" on the signature triangular logo, Louis Vuitton look-alikes with no trace of the initials "LV," and not a fake Balenciaga in sight. Our final stop yielded more promising frauds, a "Louis Vuitton" garment bag (with initials) for \$25 and a fairly convincing mini "Coach" for a mere \$7.95. Ready to make a purchase, we discovered the catch: To shop the warehouses, you need a business license and must buy a dozen identical bags at a time.

So we followed the supply chain to the sidewalk vendors downtown. With their rows of LV-less "Cherry Blossom" wannabes, the booths proved disappointing. The clerks were tight-lipped about their sources, though we noticed the merchandise's uncanny resemblance to the goods we'd just seen on Buford Highway.

Frustrated, my friend dug into the bottom of her *real* Louis Vuitton and produced the business card of one of her reliable knockoff sources—who goes by a single-name alias. The transaction with "Max" (not his real alias) felt like a drug deal: You call his cell and arrange a one-on-one meeting in a public place; he brings goods, you bring cash. Max happened to be on the Atlanta University Center campus the day we called, so we went there to check out his makeshift booth. His faux Chanes and Christian Diors priced at \$40 and up did look authentic, but we held out for something with more panache, like a Prada or Chloe.

Acquiescing that you can't get something for next to nothing, we headed to Signature Boutique, a retailer near Lenox Square. Amid the pricey jeans and flashy cocktail dresses, we spotted to-die-for Chloe Paddington look-alikes stacked on a shelf behind the register. The bags looked just like the ad the store manager had conveniently ripped from the pages of *In Style* and posted nearby. Mine for a mere \$220 (instead of the \$2,000 noted in the magazine), its black leather is supple and whispers luxury. It has those cute, shiny, C-shaped brackets around the handle and the brass padlock and matching key that comes with the real thing. It's my little secret that the inside label reads "Diva Collection" instead of "Chloe." And it draws plenty of "nice bag" compliments from admirers whose curious glances betray what they really want to ask: "Is it real?"

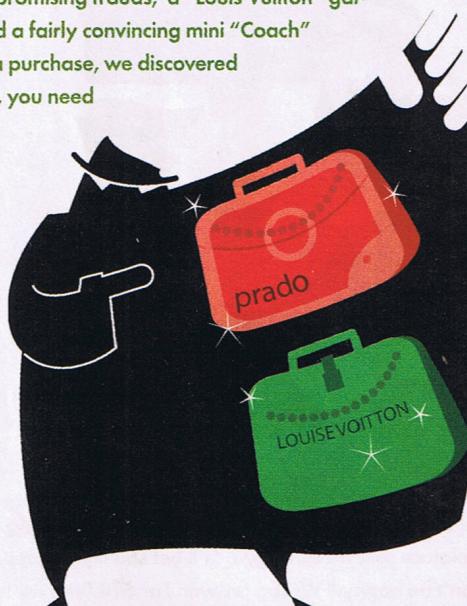


ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT THIGREN

Fab'rik // 1114 West Peachtree St., 404-881-8223; 5161 Peachtree Parkway, Suite 610A, 770-446-3122; 227 Sandy Springs Place, Suite 384, 404-252-2202, fabrikatlanta.com. Now that Fab'rik boasts three locations, every woman in the metro area can access this "hidden" secret for sexy date-night and daytime attire that won't break the bank. Always a sure bet for a versatile, stylish jacket around \$70.

Fantastic Finds // 220 Sandy Springs Circle, 404-303-1313. This upscale resale shop carries St. John and Chanel and sought-after secondhand bags such as Gucci, Fendi and Marc Jacobs reduced up to 50 percent off. We spotted a printed silk Prada blouse for \$100.

Filene's Basement Bridal Sale // 3535 Peachtree Road, 404-869-4466, filenes-basement.com. Women clamor and claw for designer gowns priced \$199 to \$500. This year, the "running of the brides" takes place on March 10.

Fox's // 3804 Roswell Road, 404-814-9292, foxs.com. This outlet features of-the-moment merchandise by big designers, discounted about 40 to 60 percent. The stellar shoe department often stocks Marc Jacobs styles.

Intimacy // Phipps Plaza, 404-261-9333, myintimacy.com. With better deals on better lingerie than that *other* lingerie store's "semi-annual sale," Oprah-endorsed Intimacy's end-of-season blowouts are in January and July.

Jeffrey Atlanta // Phipps Plaza, 404-237-9000, jeffreyatlanta.com. Watch for the style arbiter's twice-yearly end-of-season sales (spring/summer begins July 4). The discounts start off modest (20 percent) and increase each week. By the end of the season, Jil Sander, Michael Kors, Tuleh and Prada are 70 percent off.

Loehmann's // 2480 Briarcliff Road, 404-633-4156; 120 Perimeter Center Place, 770-391-9389; loehmanns.com.