



FAST TRAIN TO PARIS

I'm on the T G V - the fast train to Paris. I'm traveling with my husband, Brian, and my 5-year-old daughter Lily. It's the last leg of a two-week vacation through the French countryside, which began in the southwest region known as the Dordogne. We spent a week with friends, sightseeing, swimming, napping, wine tasting, and feasting, and then the three of us took off on our own driving tour, heading east towards the Riviera.

All that second week, I felt as if we were on a bus and truck tour except the show on this tour didn't move, we did—we lost our way in the Cevanne mountains and tiny Provençal villages, we stumbled into hidden hill towns, and we consumed everything from roadside tavern cassoulets, which were fantastic, to four star, five-course dinners featuring organ meats. Our escapades were great fun, but by the time we have descended into Nice to board the train, I'm exhausted, and I know I'll be just fine so long as I never see another gallbladder floating in cream.

As I sit on the train to Paris, I sink with relief into my seat. Lily sits next to me, looking out the window. Brian is one row in front of us and across the aisle, sipping a glass of red wine and reading *The London Times*. As the train pulls out of Nice, I too look out the window and drink in the beauty.

The train stops next at Cap D'Antibe, and I watch a young man in his late 20s sit down a few rows ahead of my husband, facing me. Normally these days, I pay little attention to young men; after all, I'm married, a mother, in my 40s, and I live in Hollywood, California, where youth is a major commodity and heads don't easily turn unless you're a "10" in your 20's. True everyone from my peers to the cashier at my local Trader Joes (who I love because he cards me when I buy a bottle of wine) assures me I look great for my age, but since I met my husband on a blind date over 14 years ago, turning heads has held little fascination for me. That sport and vanity belong to a previous chapter in my life, a time when I was searching for the kind of love and attention I now have in abundance.

Still, this is going to be an extended train ride, so to amuse myself I rest my eyes for a moment on this slim young man with piercing dark eyes and elegant Roman nose. My exhaustion lifts as I become acutely aware of his long, dark ponytail, his prominent sideburns accentuating high cheekbones and chiseled chin that, together, complete a striking if not absolutely pretty picture. I pick up my dry, literary novel and attempt to read so that my fixation on this young man isn't too obvious. Much to my surprise, when I glance up for one more peek, I catch this attractive young Frenchman checking me out.

I look over my shoulder to see who's sitting behind me, but the seat is empty. I look

back at him and he smiles. I quickly bury my head in my book, but of course I'm not reading. I'm thinking about Brian sitting one row in front of me, completely oblivious. He wouldn't in a million years believe me if I told him a man almost half his age was flirting with me. I don't quite believe it either.

20 years ago, when I was riding slower trains through Europe, I sped from one adventure to the next; while Henri, my French boyfriend, pouted alone in Paris, I hiked the Swiss Alps, sunbathed topless at the Cote D'Azur and later, at the Italian Riviera, played football and other games with wild Italian boys. Finally I took pity on Henri and hopped a train back to Paris. I was cute and young and I traveled light -- no husband, no 5-year-old. On this trip, no one makes the mistake of calling me Mademoiselle; I am Madam, and every other moment I am "Mom," "MOm," "MOM!"

Behind my book, I close my eyes and see myself at 24. I have perky breasts and a flat stomach. Henri and I are dancing on a balcony under a Paris sky to music playing somewhere deep inside his house. I press my body against his, and we kiss as a full moon rises. He pulls away to look at me, and says, "We do very well together." I smile, pull him close, and whisper, "Yes, we do," and our lips touch again . . . "Mom!" My daughter yells into my ear.

I escort Lily to the snack car because she's hungry and "needs" something sweet. As we trundle through the cars, I feel sluggish and pudgy. Too much foie gras and duck confit. As I lay out plans for the diet I'm going to start when I get home, I'm not even thinking about the young Frenchman, but there he is, standing right behind me in line. I assume this is but a coincidence until he smiles at me without even a glance at my adorable little girl.

I smile back.

Wow. Is he actually interested? Could I possibly still have some allure? I can't let this opportunity for adventure pass me by -- can I -- maybe for old times' sake?

As we wait in line, I strategize. After I buy a bag of milk chocolate wafers for Lily, I'll turn to Dark Eyes (that's what I decide to call him) and whisper *attendez ici*, (wait here, at least that's what I think it means), but of course that won't matter much, we'll hardly be speaking. I'll lead Lily back to my husband and ask him to watch her while I "freshen up." I'll return to the snack car, motion Dark Eyes to follow me, and I'll lead him to the lavatory -- no, no, too small, too smelly -- I know, remember that movie, what was it -- where Frank Sinatra and Janet Leigh fall in love between train cars? That would work. Okay, I'll race back to the snack car and motion Dark Eyes to follow me through a door that says *N'ouvert pas*, but we'll open it anyway, and there we'll be, between the cars . . .

And then what? I can't even begin to imagine. 20 years ago it was all so easy -- spot

cute guy on train, smile, sit down, talk, coffee and cigarettes when we disembark, a goodbye kiss, or if he's interesting an afternoon making love in his humble if oh-so-romantic atelier. But now, now that I have Dark Eyes out there between the train cars, with my husband and child a train car away, what next? Do we simply start making out, whispering into each other's ears, "je t'adore?" Do I throw myself on him? Do I help him unbuckle his pants, pull up my skirt? This is crazy. The conductor could come by, or my daughter could come searching for me when Brian accidentally falls asleep. Then what? I imagine Lily gazing through the window, seeing her mommy's thighs wrapped around Dark Eyes' hips. And let's not even think about the condition of those thighs. No! I won't think about Lily or my thighs. I won't think about anything except that I want this – and no, it's not suitable for The Family Channel. Yes, I unbuckle his pants, yes I pull up my skirt, yes I press against him, and yes he wraps his arms around me, and yes I feel him inside me, and yes I devour his mouth as he devours mine, and yes all the passion that exists within me wells up and, Oh God--the motion--of--the train--has never been--more acute--never more--exciting.

I jump as someone taps my shoulder. I turn, my eyes blinking rapidly, attempting to regain focus. It's him, Dark Eyes. My knees begin to quiver. The train slows to a stop, and Lily grabs my leg, trying to recover her balance. I know how she feels. He points to the man behind the counter. It seems I'm holding up the line. I hastily pay and turn back to Dark Eyes. "Excuse moi," I say, embarrassed -- for various reasons. "No problem, Madam," he says, a glint in his eye. Oh God, is he psychic? I blush and turn away.

My daughter and I head back to our seats. Dark Eyes follows. We sit, and as he passes, he leans towards me and whispers into my ear, "Bon journal". "Merci, vous aussi", I mumble demurely, as I look into his eyes before he straightens up and moves on. I watch him walk down the aisle, and as he sits, I see him greet a pretty girl who has taken the seat directly across from him. They begin an animated conversation. Instantly I feel abandoned – forgotten. What does she have that I haven't got – besides a defined waistline?

I look over at Brian. I have to laugh; he has indeed fallen asleep, his newspaper is scattered around his feet. Lily finishes a drawing, places it on my lap, and says, "look, Mommy look." I admire her work and give her a hug. She hugs me back hard, then kisses my cheek. My heart melts, as does my need to relive my youth. I pick up my book and find the place where I left off—I decide it's not dull, just challenging. The train begins to pick up speed, and over the intercom the conductor informs us that from here to Paris, we have no more stops.

Good.