

## On the Train



People were staring, she realised. From the next compartment a little boy, tugging at his mother's sleeve with one hand and pointing at Julie with the other, had brought attention to her. The boy giggled; the mother smiled, though there was no trace of malice in the gently curved mouth. Julie gave the mother a watery smile in return then fumbled in her pocket for a tissue to wipe her wet face.

The man in the seat opposite, as in all the best movies, handed her a large, white handkerchief.

“Keep it,” he told her. “I have plenty more.”

She felt the colour rise to her cheeks. How could she have made such a spectacle of herself? She wiped her face with the hanky, then again like in all the best movies, she blew her nose loudly.

“Thank you,” she said to the man sitting across from her. “Thank you.”

The train rattled along. She leaned her elbow on the window ledge, rested her head on her hand. Her breath was still coming in uneven gasps, and she could feel her eyes burning, and she just knew her nose was like a bright red tomato.

She wasn't even sure why she cried any more. It had become as natural to her as breathing, or eating. Throughout the day, at unexpected moments, when she was sitting still, the tears would come. Silently at first they trickled down her face, then, as they gathered

momentum, her breathing would become uneven, and a sob would escape her. Before long her shoulders would heave and panic would set in. Would it ever end, this grief?

And now the ultimate shame – she had cried in public. On a train to be exact. With a little boy pointing and giggling while his mother looked on sympathetically. And a man, an unknown stranger had given her his crisp, cotton handkerchief.

The train rattled further its rhythm soothing like the rocking of a baby's cradle. Her breathing steadied; the urge to gulp dissipated. She was able to drag herself back into reality, and thoughts of what lay ahead. She leaned her elbow on the small, silver ashtray next to the window, rested her chin in her hand, the side of her head pressed against the glass. The countryside, with a bright, September sun shining down upon it a green so sharp it hurt the eyes, darted past.

The little boy who had watched her so intently, and pointed when her sobbing had become too extreme, soon lost interest and began to groan in boredom at his mother, and to tug at her sleeve and whinge about not having anything to do. Julie smiled as she heard the mother say in a pinched, tight voice: we're nearly there, darling. Just be patient. Oh, the lie. They had at least another hour to go. Julie expected that the mother secretly longed to give the little sod a clip or at least yell at him at the top of her lungs. That's what mothers did when no one was around to catch them. Only in public did they talk in that awful, frustrated voice and pretend they were infinitely gentle. Julie could sigh in relief that she had left her two at home. She was free to close her eyes and speed up the journey by taking a nap. The luxury of it.