

PART ONE

Putting the Wheels in Motion

In the summer of 1999, I was steaming toward forty—and I was looking for a greater sense of contentment. Some people might say I'd already experienced a glamorous life. I'd married a Frenchman (of noble descent, which had made me a countess) and lived in Paris for eleven years, partaking vividly in all the aspects of an elegant French life from enjoying sumptuous meals out and at fancy dinner parties to catching the latest, most talked-about art exhibitions in town.

Even before marrying my Frenchman, I had established my own business, Chic Promenade, a shopping service that organized jaunts to Paris's lesser-known boutiques and arranged visits behind-the-scenes at the couture houses and other big designer names. Indeed, I spent eleven years soaking up French culture and fashion. With my husband, Stéphane, a professional photographer, we circulated in a high-stepping world filled with fascinating people at events such as cocktail parties at Cartier, art gallery openings and five-star hotel receptions.

But I was out of balance. And I didn't fully realize that until I moved back to the States and began a new life as a single woman. (How I hate the term *divorcée*.) It was time to reclaim myself, to figure out what kind of a woman I really was. That didn't mean shunning my fussy Parisian side or my French flair and *savoir faire*. But it meant becoming a little more real. We all need embellishments, traditions and a certain *style de vie*, but for me, there was too much emphasis on all that in France. I needed to figure out what else was important in my new life back in America.

I wanted to develop my other sides—especially my physical side. This didn't come as a conscious decision; it just happened. I found myself dusting off the Trek bicycle in my parents' garage, given to me by an old boyfriend (a not-so-subtle hint, I suppose) and began to ride. That was the beginning of my transformation from girly-girl to cycling enthusiast, a metamorphosis that seemed to lead quite naturally to my relationship with Peter—my polar opposite—who worked in the local bike shop. And eventually, to Peter's transformation and our own little "tour de France."

Almost a year after we began dating, and the morning of our departure for a six-week cycling tour in France, I headed home to my tiny, upstate New York apartment after rushing about to do some last-minute errands. I walked up the steep, narrow stairs of my old, historic building, juggling packages and hangers that felt like they were cutting into my hands. I trudged all the way to my top-floor apartment until finally I arrived at the landing. I paused outside the door, dropped my heavy load of dry cleaning, cat food and last-minute travel supplies and fumbled for my key. No noise emanated from within, so I wondered if Pete was inside. *I hope so, I thought. I hope he's finished his packing. Breathe, I told myself. You're almost there. You're on the good end of things. You'll soon be on the plane for Paris with a handsome guy you love, embarking on the adventure of a lifetime. Just breathe.*

"Hello," I practically sang out in a sweet, cheery voice.

"Hey, how's it going?" Pete called back.

"Ohhhhhhkay," I replied, feeling my jaw drop both from the drawn-out "oh" in OK and also the shock of the moment. I had made it all the way into my apartment and couldn't believe the scene before me.

Pete chuckled and gave me a wry smile. “Don’t worry, I’ve got everything under control.”

I stood there and surmised the situation as my bundles flopped at my feet. Mr. Kitty, my black-and-tan tabby, rubbed between my ankles and my pile of stuff. My eyes scanned the living and dining room area of my 600-square-foot Victorian apartment. It seemed like I was already assessing the damages. Pete had installed a large bike stand dangerously close to my eighteenth-century French armoire, the most important treasure that I brought back from France six years prior. His bike was clamped onto the stand; the front wheel was spun out at an angle, just inches from my piece of museum-quality furniture. He had laid out an array of tools and gear parts on an end table that was butted up against one of my other accent pieces; my precious flower-patterned chintz table skirts were fluffed out within perilous range. My off-white, shabby chic armchair wasn’t much farther from Pete than the armoire.

I gasped. I probably should have counted to ten—or even twenty—but instead I blurted out, “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he bellowed back.

I could feel my heart accelerating and suddenly the romantic images of us—enjoying France together, pedaling through the countryside and sipping wine at a quaint hotel—whooshed before my eyes and then extinguished in one giant pouf.

Kitty rustled in the bags for his treats, purring intensely as he head-butted the sides of my legs.

Is this going to be our coup de grâce? I wondered in a flash as I looked around my prissy apartment, which had been transformed into a full-scale bike shop. Pete had more bike tools and accessories than many professional cycling teams and a good portion of them were strewn about my cozy abode amidst my cushy pillows and luxurious table coverings.

“Don’t worry, it’ll all be fine,” Pete added in a much calmer voice.

“Ya think?” I practically hollered back.

He chuckled and then flashed one of his big, toothy smiles. I backed down. Finally I was able to breathe.

Fortunately Pete did not want his super slick (and pricey) road bike to tip over any more than I wanted my precious armoire to be scratched.

The best we could do was to laugh about it, regardless of all those greasy gears. Had I not been worried about getting messy, I would have given him a hug. I found his tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed and incredibly fit appearance irresistible. His large, expressive features sometimes made me melt. And in truth, his childlike, devil-may-care antics such as this one endeared him to me even more. Plus there was no time for a full on blowout. It was the eleventh hour, and the bikes needed to be packed.

I should have figured that it would take some doing to fit a six-foot-long bike into a four-foot-long bike box. The wheels, handlebars, pedals and seat all had to be removed. Helmets, water bottles and bike shoes needed to be tucked into the remaining spaces.

We were finally on our way. We left our charming little town of Saratoga Springs on a glorious end-of-summer day and breathed a sigh of relief that the dreadful task of packing was behind us. We would check everything in Albany, and, although we were changing planes in Boston, we would not have to deal with our cargo until Paris.

Pete barreled down the Northway (although we were headed south, this highway is still referred to as the Northway). I gripped the armrest of the car door but made a conscious effort

not to ask him to slow down. Today his speed was warranted since we were running late. We always seemed to be late; that was something we had in common. I was sure that was a sign we'd be good travelers together.

"Whoa!" I found myself exclaiming as he darted in between two cars, switching lanes like a madman. I sensed his annoyance with me and decided once again to button it up. I didn't want another argument. No, the stakes were too high. No sense getting off on a bad footing.

I had taken many trips to France in the six years I had moved back to the States. But I had never gone with a man, I had never gone with a love. And this was to be a work trip to boot. I gazed out the window and admired the emerging array of marigold, burnt umber and rust amid the faded green of late summer. I took solace in the fact that I was trusting my gut, that my instinct was telling me to have faith in the process. I knew intuitively that I was meant to go on this journey with Pete. I just didn't know what the outcome would be for us but oh, how I hoped it would be grand.

I wanted to live a fully satisfying love, whatever that meant to me—I was still trying to figure it out. I hadn't given up the hope—my heart's desire since I was a young girl—of having a child. Yes, Peter seemed to be a good candidate for that, especially since like attracts like—at least from a physical standpoint—and we were like, a not-so-negligible factor that drew me to him as a mate and lifelong partner. (I'm also tall, brown-haired and brown-eyed, although not as fit.) Certainly I'd have a better sense of how we matched up after traveling with him for well over a month. *Or would I?*

My work goals for the trip seemed almost as nebulous as my relationship goals. I had already written three guidebooks on shopping and touring in France, but I knew this was a whole different project, something much more personalized, something that also had to do with cycling, my new passion. I approached the project with the idea that I was working on another guidebook but I knew there'd be more of a narrative, particularly with Peter along for the travels. Did I feel pressure to produce? Not really, I knew I would write something from the trip, I just wasn't sure of the format.

The various tourism offices (for regions as well as towns) knew I was a travel writer that delivered, so they were more than happy to roll out the red carpet and help me discover their land without me having to outlay much of my resources.

"What are you thinking about, sweetie?" Pete asked.

"Oh, not much. Just pondering the trip."

"You'll see, we'll have a good time. We'll have fun together in France."

"I'm sure we will—I have no doubt about that," I said in a reassuring tone as Pete sped off the exit for the airport terminal.

from **Storybook Alsace**

"Hello, I'm Christian, I'm going to be your guide for the next few days," said this blond, blue-eyed man from the regional tourist department that greeted us in the hotel lobby.

"That's perfect," I said. "Your English is excellent."

"Yes, and I love cycling."

"Well, we couldn't have asked for a better start than that—don't you think, Pete?"

“Yeah, that’s great,” Pete replied, although I sensed he was already questioning Christian’s cycling ability since he’d showed up in a pair of flimsy track shorts—quite the contrast to the ultra padded pants Pete and I were wearing. *Hmmmm.*

We soon learned that one definitely doesn’t have to look like an avid cyclist to be one. Christian knew his way around the bike paths of Strasbourg, of which there are many. I was a little shaky, at first, riding alongside the traffic in this bustling city, but it didn’t take long before we reached a well-indicated and quiet path (one of countless that radiate out from the center of town). Pete had already snapped his fingers a few times at me and barked, “C’mon, c’mon pokey. Pedal!”

I can’t believe he’s bugging me right off, I thought. *Oh well, better to just ignore him.* I accelerated as much as I could and before long, we were all enjoying the peaceful landscapes along the river Ill. Thankfully I didn’t dwell on Pete’s remarks—the morning was too perfect for him to ruin it for me by being a jerk.

Swans and ducks completed the storybook picture on this stretch of bike path, which continued along another waterway known as the Canal de la Bruche. Built centuries ago for the transportation of wine and supplies, today the canal remains very sleepy, except for the presence of an occasional fisherman or a passing bicyclist. Picture-perfect views emerged: the postman pedaling down the path with his trappings of the day’s deliveries; old stone houses originally built for the canal keepers, virtually all of which were punctuated by countless flower boxes spewing forth pink and red cascading geraniums; and, off in the distance, fairytale-like bell towers with hillside vineyards as their backdrop.

It was Tuesday, September 19, and by now the bright midday sun had burned off any remnants of a misty morning. It truly felt like summertime; we were doubly blessed. I was living a dream. I had not known such a flood of contentment for a long time. All was well and, thinking that, I gave a little ring of my bell. Pete and Christian turned and grinned, sweet smiles of affirmation that told me they were feeling pretty wonderful, too.

We had planned to have lunch in Molsheim, a historic town approximately sixteen miles southwest of Strasbourg. Before arriving there, however, we pulled off the bike path at Wolxheim, a village of wine growers who were well into the throes of their harvest. The heady smell of fermenting grapes hung thick in the air. A good number of the villagers were mobilized to help with the harvest and with the actual making of the wine. Tractors trundled about towing wagon loads full of ripe red grapes, a folksy rural scene that appeared locked in time. Drawn by the charming array of red-tile roofed houses painted in every shade of pink from salmon to sandstone to flamingo to ochre, we took an extended tour around this village to take it all in.

“Are you hungry for lunch?” Christian asked.

“We’re starving,” Pete and I replied practically in unison. We ducked into a quaint restaurant and were served an onion tarte in a flash. Turkey in red pepper sauce accompanied by *spetzel* (a lightly fried, chewy pasta, typical of Alsace), and a *tarte aux quetsches* (a pie made with dark-red plums) soon followed. Our conversations ranged from light to serious.

“I love all the fairytale scenes we observed from Strasbourg to Molsheim,” I said. “I’ve done the wine route in Alsace before but never felt *this* enchanted.”

“When you’re in a car, you say, oh, did you see that?” Christian replied. “On a bike, you stop and look and observe the wine growers, then you smell the grapes that have already begun to ferment.”

Pete and I nodded in agreement then listened intently as Christian spoke of the history that had shaped Alsace. “Under the reign of Louis XIV—around 1650—the region was French

for the first time. In 1870, Alsace became German until the end of the first World War. During the second World War, Alsace was annexed. My grandmother was French, then German, then French," Christian continued. "We are lucky because no one died." Christian went on to say, "Having lived through these complex dynamics, it makes sense that the European parliament is based in Strasbourg."

"It sounds like this fusion of cultures gave birth to one distinct people, the Alsatians?" I ventured.

"Yes, many Alsatians speak—or at least understand—some French and German. Alsatian is a dialect that closely resembles German; there is no written language," Christian replied.

"And it's because of the many German influences in the region that there's this charming Hansel and Gretel quality to all the homes and villages," I added. "Doesn't it look just out of a storybook, Pete?"

"Oh, yes," he answered with one of his wry smiles. I could tell he was half teasing me for being so captivated by our first half day of cycling in France. I knew he was loving it, too—he just wasn't one to gush.

"Let's stop here," Christian hollered, as he pulled into what appeared to be some sort of garage. We had left the bike path after Molsheim—after lunch—and set out on a more intrepid tour of the villages along Alsace's famed wine route. Here in Dorlisheim, it seemed like we were making an impromptu stop at a vintner's. "It's the first day of this winemaker's harvest," Christian declared.

We peeked in to see what was happening at the press. "Would you like some?" the vintner asked in French.

"It's fresh-squeezed grape juice," Christian said as he poured it right into Pete's empty water bottle and then did the same with mine. "It's cool to the taste since the just-pressed grapes still hold the chill of the night air." *Damn, all these French people are so poetic*, I thought.

"It's a little cloudy," the vintner explained. "The juice has not been completely filtered. Indeed, his nectar was churned up with all the richness of the earth. "With time and the right care, this yellowish liquid will turn into a fine Pinot Blanc," he added. "Look, it's beginning to fizzle," Pete said to me a couple of hours later as we were softly pedaling along the route. "It's already beginning to change."

I took a sip of my water bottle and puckered my lips. "'Twas a delicious beverage that's now a tad sour," I said with an English accent and pursed lips.

"You're such a goofball," Pete said, shaking his head at me. We laughed and cruised forward.

from **Beautiful Burgundy**

In the dining room, the crowd was equally as interesting, and Pete and I were happy to have been strategically placed for people watching. "I've never seen such a diverse group of people in a fancy French restaurant," I commented to Pete. "Wine connoisseurs must be an eclectic bunch. Half the men are in suits, half aren't, and look, one man is wearing jeans and a flannel shirt."

As the parade of specialty dishes began, however, our focus shifted to our table. The chef, once again, had selected a special menu for us as well as a sampling of wines from the region since my travel writer status elevated us to be treated as privileged guests of the house. A little *crème de persil* (parsley cream) was presented to open our appetites, a subtle beginning to what clearly was to be an extraordinary meal. Next, a plate framing two generous lobes of foie gras, accented by a little row of *fleur de sel de Guérande* and a little row of ground pepper from Les Landes, was placed in front of each of us. This simple marriage of ingredients was exceedingly pure, both visually and to the taste.

"This salt has been harvested near the medieval village of Guérande, in the Western Loire next to Brittany, since the seventh century," I explained to Pete. "I went there when I was researching *The Riches of France*. It's considered by most chefs to be the most flavorful salt in the world."

Immensely impressed by this little gastronomic debriefing, Pete offered his opinion, "The salt brings out the flavor of the foie gras really well."

"I can't believe it," I said to Pete. "I just realized that in less than a week I've had foie gras three times." I enjoyed every bit of the delicious dish, which was greatly enhanced by its accompanying Chablis Premier Cru, but I could only finish half of it.

"Do you have a problem with the foie gras?" the waiter asked.

"Oh, no, but if I eat it all, I won't be able to fit into my clothes," I said somewhat sheepishly, knowing that my comment would be reported back to the chef, and I would forever be remembered as *la journaliste américaine* that did not finish her foie gras. (The chef in a restaurant of such unparalleled quality is always apprised of these kinds of happenings.)

After a brusque exchange of worried looks, the headwaiter rushed over and smoothed everything over. "Ah, we will make a foie gras sandwich tomorrow for you to take on the road," he declared with a huge amount of professionalism that put me at ease.

When the sommelier poured us a Chassagne-Montrachet '97, I ascertained that the next course would most likely be from the sea. And with that, out came an outstanding roasted lobster. We were each served a half, delicately dressed with a rosemary cream sauce and skirted with little scoops of wild rice and ratatouille. After finishing the lobster, our appetites were satiated. Even after all the calories I had surely burned during the afternoon's cycling, I had to unzip my skirt an inch to better enjoy the next course, a most fragrant-filled saddle of lamb, served with fresh baby vegetables. To accompany this course, the sommelier carefully poured Vosne-Romanée premier cru '93, a wine from just above Nuits-Saint-Georges. "This is an homage to your trek up to that part of Burgundy," the sommelier added with a twinkle in his eye. The wine was so delicious that we were pleased with ourselves for having bragged about our day's exploits to this friendly wine steward.

As we dined, we observed the pageantry of the large, busy dining room. Pete and I were particularly impressed with Madame Crotet, the wife of the chef, and clearly a reigning force behind Hostellerie de Levernois. At one point we observed Madame dressed most elegantly, in a diaphanous, gauzy top, carving meat as graciously and effortlessly as though she was waving a baton. As is customary in most restaurants in France, big and small, Madame's chief responsibilities lie in making sure that all goes smoothly in the dining room while her husband (and, in this case, also their sons) does the same in the kitchen.

Everyone had an important role here, especially since they were playing to a full house of highly discriminating diners. Serving the cheese course was in itself a sort of procession. Little tables were first set up in front of our table. Then immense silver platters, laden with a

huge assortment of cheeses, were ceremoniously carried over by four people (two per platter) and placed on top of the tables. There was an extra large platter for all the cows' milk cheeses and another for the goats' milk cheeses. "I could make a dinner out of the cheese course alone," I said to Pete.

"I can't believe they bring all this out after the huge meal we just had," he answered.

"I know. But it's all so good, we must have a good sampling. Just wash it down with more wine," I joked.

The pre-dessert sorbet, made from Marc de Bourgogne (a spirit made from Burgundy grapes), was not only extraordinary but also cleansed our palates perfectly in preparation for the real dessert. I nearly swooned over the baked peach crowned with pistachio ice cream.

"I am beyond sated," I said to Pete as we padded off to our room.

"That was outrageous," Pete replied.

"A meal we'll always remember," I added.

"And how."

How I loved that he enjoyed these feasts. As long as they didn't interfere with cycling, his enthusiasm for French gastronomy rivaled mine. It was so much fun to share all this with him. In many ways, being with him in France—and sharing in his excitement and discoveries—was like experiencing my beloved land for the first time.

Living Large in the Southwest

It was Tuesday, October 10. As much as we felt blessed with what we had experienced so far, we were also sad that our trip was winding down. The Southwest was to be the last region of France that we were to explore *à vélo*—at least for this trip—and on many levels it seemed as though we had just begun to stretch our legs. This was to be the mother of all regions for Pete, since the first half of our stay here was to encompass much of the Pyrenees, and Pete had his sights on taking a chunk out of one or more of these mountains' mythic climbs.

After a lengthy drive from Collioure, we finally landed in a highway rest stop just outside of Pau, the designated place where we were to meet François, our contact from the Béarn (pronounced Bay-arn) department of France, one of the many *départements* of this region. Accompanying François was a very jovial Frenchman by the name of Jean-Renée (J.R. to his friends), who we were told knew his way around France's most impressive cols (mountain tops). With all the aplomb of an official tour guide, the tall and handsome François expedited this parking lot rendezvous, instructing us to follow him to a more appropriate place to converse. Immediately Pete and I felt as though we were in expert hands and that it was unlikely that we would have to do a lot of time wasting and unnecessary travel in this province the way we did in Languedoc.

We blew through Pau like a team car on the day of a big race. "The Tour always goes through this town," Pete said. "It's the gateway to the Pyrenees."

Soon afterward, we found ourselves pulling up to L'Horizon, a modest country hotel in the Jurançon, a picturesque section of this department that we were to explore for the rest of the day. It was just past lunchtime, so it was out of the question (thankfully) to sit down to do an extended lunch. We were, however, installed at a table where a magnificent feast of an autumnal dessert was laid before us—truly a meal in itself. If I were to judge the cuisine of this unassuming restaurant by the quality of its sweets, then a meal here is topnotch. On a plate the

size of a platter, each of us was served an elegant *crumble de saison*, the French equivalent of our homespun dessert, made from seasonal fruits and nuts and topped off with chestnut ice cream and a *coulis de figue* (fig sauce). Of course, the beverage of choice accompanying this sweet confection was a perfectly chilled Jurançon, the white wine of the region that is either dry or (most often) sweet. We were served a *moelleux*, a sweet one, an exquisite *vin doux* with about half the alcoholic content of your more heady Muscats. Our plan was still to do some cycling before the end of the day.

It didn't take long to figure out that J.R. was not one to remain idle and that cycling was definitely on his mind. We learned that since his retirement about six years ago, he had cycled more than 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) over more than eighty-five cols throughout France's most spectacular mountain ranges, including the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Jura, the Vosges and the Massif Central. As the head of the Club Cyclo-Tourisme for these mountain ranges, he organizes many rides that would make even the most ardent cyclists feel faint. Today, though, we were to cruise around the Jurançon on terrain that supposedly even I could handle.

But before I was to be allowed out with the guys, I was to spend some more time with François learning about the delicious Jurançon wines. (I suppose they were possibly hoping that after more tasting, I'd be so unfit to ride that they'd only have to accompany me just long enough to humor me.) Behind their respective parked cars, Pete and J.R. changed into their Lycra. They were quite the pair, the two of them—Pete as tall as J.R. was short, with neither of them having much means to communicate with each other except their common language of cycling.

François and I set out in his little Renault, traversing cornfields just on the verge of harvest and passing by gardens with tomatoes still ripe on the vine. I noticed beautiful, still-blooming hydrangeas of the sort you see on Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard, a sight that I had only seen in certain parts of Brittany before. There were palm trees, too—clearly the local climate was quite particular. With daytime temperatures easily reaching seventy-five degrees and sunshine a more frequent occurrence than rain, this delightful weather is due to the fact that the Jurançon sits at the foot of the Pyrenees. As with every other wine-growing area of France that we visited thus far, here, too, we were lucky enough to have arrived during the harvest, this time right at the beginning. The grapes for the *moelleux* would have to wait another two weeks, allowing the fruit to become extra ripe and rich in sugar content before being tenderly plucked from the vines.

As we chugged up this hilly terrain, I was happy I was not riding it on my bike. There was absolutely no one around on these sometimes single-lane country roads, and I couldn't help but think that any enthusiastic cyclist in search of a challenge would be thrilled to land on this turf. It looked a little too much for me, though.

The vines were unique to the area, too. All extremely well-pruned, here they were coaxed to grow up high, a good five feet off the ground so as to avoid the frosts of November and early December. (Many grapes are actually left on the vines that long, drying into concentrated, shrunken nuggets of flavor, perfect for the production of the sweetest *vin doux* of the region.) François and I ended our wine tour at La Commanderie de Jurançon, a showcase boutique where visitors can taste wines from more than twenty-five domaines. I was careful not to *déguste* too much, though, and drank plenty of water, since I still had my heart set on experiencing some of the super cycling in this area.

Soon Pete and J.R. zipped into view, both grinning like little kids. Obviously, communication posed no problem for them, and instead, they stood before François and me praising each other's bike riding skills in their respective languages.

"*Nous avons fait que dix kilomètres,*" J.R. began. They only did ten kilometers (about six miles).

"Yeah, but it was a nice climb." Pete added. "Probably with a ten percent gradient, then a little spit of fifteen percent. It went up through the steepest sections of the area."

"*Les Côteaux du Jurançon,*" J.R. added.

I smiled at Pete because I was happy he was having fun. I also felt proud—and somewhat mystified—about how he seemed to understand J.R.'s French. "Do you want to hit some more ambitious climbs?" I asked. They both looked at me as if to say, *what do you think?* Suddenly I sensed François' presence even more.

Then Pete and J.R. said, each in his own language and practically in unison, "That's OK. Why don't we all take one together?"

They patiently waited for me to conclude my visit and change into my own bike garb and then off we went.

I was lucky that the ride started with *une belle descente*, and as I found myself freewheeling down the undulating hills of this bucolic countryside, I, too, felt like a kid that had just experienced the real joys of cycling for the first time. About two miles into the ride, though, we encountered our first significant climb. I felt proud of myself for automatically raising my fanny out of the saddle and for beginning to power-pedal, all the time determinedly counterbalancing my weight over the handlebars.

"*Non, non, non, ce n'est pas comme ça qu'il faut faire la danseuse, Mariebett,*" or no, no, no, that's not how you do the dancer, Maribeth, J. R. instructed. (The "th" always poses a challenge for the French.) Instantly deflated, OK, I thought, *now I have two instructors with me, so I guess there's no room for any indifferent behavior.*

La danseuse that J.R. was referring to is that exquisite motion a cyclist makes while standing up on his or her pedals, truly dancing in perfect synchronization so that bike and body work together, arms and legs cooperate without expending the slightest amount of useless energy. Imagine Lance Armstrong on one of his alpine climbs.

Sadly I have never been much of a dancer on or off the dance floor and my coordination is about as keen as a marathon runner attempting to simultaneously run and do the fox trot without missing a beat.

"C'mon Bessie, be more even with your pedaling," Pete chimed in. "Remember what I told you before. Smooth."

This time I was eager to learn a few pointers, so I tried to assume a nice, even rhythm.

"You always have to keep something in reserve," J.R. continued in French, just as Pete seemed to say the same thing in English. I was beginning to think that they had collaborated, that they had discussed my bike riding inadequacies and that they were jumping at the chance to bring them up.

"Like don't go into your granny gear (the easiest gear) when you're only halfway up the climb," Pete added.

"Always keep something under your wheel," J.R. continued.

Jeez, so glad to be out with my two instructors, I thought. Maybe I should have sampled more wine with François during our tour. That Jurançon was delicious.

Instead I decided to give up my stubborn ways and began to really apply myself. I was under expert instruction after all; J.R. was a *moniteur*, so how could I refuse his lessons? Soon I felt myself really progressing, really gaining confidence. I was riding faster than I had before.

"See," Pete said, "It helped that you pushed yourself yesterday with the group ride. Today you're even stronger."

"What does *à bloc* mean?" I asked Jean-Renée. And he explained that that meant that you were going full speed or that you had reached your maximum. *Hmmmm*, I guess I was going *à bloc*—at least by my standards. "What about *faire une valise à quelqu'un*?" I ventured. I learned that was an expression used to say that you had really left someone behind, as in leaving them as baggage. By the end of the ride, I couldn't help but think that it was sweet that Pete and J.R. hadn't made a valise out of me.

At the conclusion of it all, I felt proud of myself and of Pete. His knowledge of cycling and polite ways were clearly charming the French. I couldn't imagine doing such a trip with anyone but him. His sweetness and superior cycling ability were conquering me on each step of our adventure. As much as we were opposites in many ways, we did complement each other well. There's no doubt that in most instances, he had what I was lacking and vice versa. In considering our unique balancing act, I felt more content with our relationship than ever before.

from **Alpine Adventures**

Tour mayhem hit us as soon as we stepped off the ferry. I approached the crowd just in time to see a brightly painted car with a giant grocery cart brimming with mock groceries zooming by. The famous multi-vehicle publicity caravan that passes before the cyclists, warming up the crowd and distributing all kinds of goodies—useful and otherwise—was already passing through. It appeared that this over-sized shopping caddie was the last of the bunch. Suddenly I realized that I had to step on it if I wanted to make it to the finish line in time. I thanked Pierre for all his help and relinquished my little yellow bike to him on the spot.

Then it was time to run. It was not hard to determine in which direction but forging my way through the crowds posed more of a challenge. Finally I found my way to the information booth, where, although I wasn't expected until tomorrow, I introduced myself and requested a special *laissez-passer*. The small crew from the tourist office of Aix was most agreeable, granting me a pass that allowed me access to the grandstand near the finish line. Just as I inched toward the special VIP section, I heard people yelling, "*Ils arrivent, ils sont à quatre kilomètres.*" My attempts to find a choice seat were in vain, since no sooner did people announce the cyclists' arrival at four kilometers, than they blew right in with all the speed of thoroughbred racehorses. I had missed my special VIP seat but still it was all very exciting and fun being caught up in the frenzy of the crowd.

To my surprise, the spectators thinned out quickly. (I later figured out that they were probably trying to catch up with the cyclists.) This allowed me to weave through to the tribune where I took in the day's ceremonies. I had viewed this daily ritual of the Tour numerous times on TV but to sit there across from this colossal inflatable stage with all the media, Tour officials, local dignitaries and pomp was really a hoot. When the theme song of the Tour began to play, I knew it was time for the ceremony to begin, even though some riders were still straggling in. The backdrop, attendants and flowers changed with each jersey that was presented. First came the winner of that day's stage, then the yellow jersey for the overall leader of the Tour, then the

green for the fastest sprinter so far, followed up with the red polka dot for the King of the Mountains, or strongest climber, and the white for the best young rider. I was proud of myself that even without Pete, I could follow all these presentations. And what I knew so far also told me that Lance would be up on the podium soon and that there was no reason to sweat it; the Tour had barely begun. (Up until that point, most of the riding was on comparatively flat terrain; tomorrow would be the first stage in the mountains and that's when the real action begins.)

A mass exodus ensued at the end of the ceremonies and I edged my way toward my hotel which turned out to be only a short walk away. It was hard to believe that it was the same place I had walked out of earlier that day because as I approached, I discovered that it was swarming with activity on the outside. My jaw dropped when I saw the huge, sparkling U.S. Postal team bus parked alongside my hotel. And as I approached, I realized that was where much of the crowd had gone. People were milling around, gawking at the bikes being hosed down after a long day of riding and peering into the gathering of Postal team cars that were there as well. I wasn't sure whether or not they were expecting one of the guys to step out of the bus at any moment, but I approached for a closer look. Then I put two and two together and in my characteristic un-shy manner approached one of the bike technicians. "Is the team staying at the Adelpia, too?"

Jackpot! I couldn't believe my luck—to think that I was right in the center of this hubbub. I walked through the throngs of fans that had already gathered in front of the hotel with all the confidence of an actress on her way to the Oscars. Inside, the hotel was in full swing, busy with check-ins of the Tour entourage and various other goings-on. I was relieved to see that I was recognized as a hotel guest and scurried into the elevator. My plan was to retreat into my room to regroup a bit and then decide what to do and where to go. Perhaps I could bump into some of the guys downstairs at the spa. Or maybe I could meet up with them at the bar for a beer. *Nah*, neither of those places seemed very likely for super pro cyclists in the middle of an extraordinary endeavor.

As I padded down the hall to my room, I noticed a scale, a cooler and a bowl of boiled potatoes outside of a door. *That's strange*, I thought, and with all the gall of a *National Enquirer* reporter, I stole a glance beyond the open door and spotted a massage table set up and ready to be put to use inside the room. The plot was thickening.

On my trip downstairs to the hotel gift shop (a good pretext for strolling around), I learned that indeed the whole U.S. Postal team was staying on my floor—including Lance. Thankfully, I found the discretion to avert my eyes as I passed two towel-clad cyclists in the hall back up on my floor, presumably changing places at the massage table. (The only thing I did see was very pronounced tan lines.)

Once again, I retreated to my room to regroup and to freshen up for dinner. *What's going on here?* I asked myself as I vacillated about what to wear to dinner and how to style my hair. *I'm acting like some sort of a teenage groupie.* I hadn't experienced such sensations since I crossed good-looking senior boys in the halls during my freshman year in high school. The difference here, though, was that I was now a mature woman—nearly forty years old—and these guys were at least ten years my junior! In the midst of all this adrenaline rush, it occurred to me, too, that I was quite involved with a man, although he now happened to be on the other side of the Atlantic, who remained very close to my heart.

Oh, well, I suppose there's nothing wrong with a little flirt. It keeps you alive, after all. But still, I couldn't help wondering what all this giddiness was really about. I had been around famous

people before—including when Larry Bird once ended up at my Boston apartment—but never had these encounters provoked such emotion. I just shrugged my shoulders and chalked it up to the Tour and my excitement about cycling overall.

Like so many others, I wanted to say hello to Lance, to congratulate him, and to tell him he's such a remarkable inspiration on so many fronts. I remembered that Pete told me he had a house in the south of France with his wife, so I thought maybe he'd enjoy receiving copies of my books, *The Riches of France* and *The Riches of Paris*. Books in hand, I chatted with Lance's bodyguard (who boldly stood watch outside his door) on my way to dinner. He was most amicable and encouraged me to wait a couple of minutes for Lance to leave his room to give him my best wishes in person.

Suddenly, I felt shy and awkward. Then I said to myself, *oh, what the heck*. Lance emerged and greeted me with all the grace and friendliness of a well-respected diplomat. He was truly charming, and much to my surprise, expressed genuine interest in my work, congratulated me on my books and thanked me for the gift. When I asked him if I could have my picture taken with him, he happily obliged, repositioning us so as not to capture the unsightly *sortie* (exit) sign in the background. We headed off to dinner together and picked up a few cyclists from the team AG2R on the way down in the elevator. Our chatting more or less ceased at that point, we said quick hellos to the other cyclists, and rode the rest of the way in silence.

In groupie mode, I shamelessly asked the maître d'hôtel to seat me at the table closest to the two large tables occupied by the U.S. Postal team. Tonight the dining room was packed, but much to my good fortune, there was a little table discreetly tucked halfway behind a pillar close to them. As usual, I had my trusty notepad with me, so I didn't look hopelessly alone and idle sitting there in such an animated room. I did steal glances from time to time over at my celebrated cyclists' tables, but, honestly, mine were not more frequent than those of the other diners. It was quite a sight to see all those handsome men from the U.S. Postal and other teams, all freshly showered and neatly dressed in their team warm-up suits congregating around their dinner table after a full day out on the bike. The adjacent table was made up of the team manager, Johan Bruyneel, the assistants, all the *soigneurs* (or caretakers whose responsibilities include tending to the needs of the cyclists, from laundry to massage) and the rest of the support staff that accompanies the team to a different location every day of the three-week Tour.

I had read in my cycling mags that each cyclist burns an average of 8,000 to 9,000 calories a day, part of which is consumed in the form of sugary treats and drinks out on the road. This makes dinner more important than ever, not only for the calories consumed, but also for the pleasure of eating a meal together, and the camaraderie shared. The team's own private chef, Willy, a Swiss, served up the courses in huge quantity, each one looking more delicious than the other. Salad, pasta, chicken with roasted potatoes and vegetables, strawberry tarts and yogurts were all dispensed in copious amounts along with bread and wine. *Yes, wine!*

The guys seemed to be focused on more than their food, however, and the mood overall seemed serious. They were doing their homework. I could see that they were studying graphs of the next day's race, and I could tell from a distance that there were many pointy peaks, which, of course, meant that it was going to be a big day in the mountains. It was the eve of the Alpe d'Huez stage, that infamous grueling chunk of the Alps that truly separates the men from the boys, the elite cyclists from the slackers. (There aren't any true slackers in the Tour de France, but everyone has a bad day at some point.)

Two other handsome and fit-looking gents dined at a small table on the other side of me. Former professional cyclist Steve Bauer was one of them and by the end of the meal, I had moved over to join him and the other cyclist in a glass of wine.

“So what do you guys do?” I asked after I told them my reason for following the Tour.

“I operate Steve Bauer Bike Tours,” Steve said.

“What kind of bike tours do you organize?” I asked as I sipped my wine.

“We specialize in high-end tours for people to cycle along the actual Tour de France route. They also attend the stages.”

“Wow, that sounds fun *and* challenging. I’d guess that’s the perfect vacation for high achievers. If ever I went on such a tour, I’d need to spend some time in the support van.”

We had some laughs and finished off the evening in the bar where most of the Postal staff, including Johan Bruyneel, had congregated. (The cyclists had already retired to their rooms.) The atmosphere was clubby, and in between sips of coffee, we shared our impressions of the day. Steve filled me in on some of the ins and outs of cycling and I chatted with Johan about my love of Belgium—his native land—France, the French language, my work and my new passion for cycling and the Tour. “I initially spoke French with a Belgian accent,” I told Johan, a Belgian that grew up in a cycling-mad country. “When I was sixteen, I did an exchange with a Belgian girl from a French-speaking family in Antwerp and that experience had a big effect on me. I love Belgium—the people are really nice. ”

“So why did you lose it?”

“Lose what?”

“Your accent. Now you just have an American accent,” he joked. The mood was considerably more jovial than earlier, and I thought to myself that was probably the first time all day that most of them had a chance to kick back.

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So many people have helped to shape *A Tour of the Heart* over the span of more than a decade, it’s hard to remember everyone. I ask for forgiveness in advance if I don’t cite you specifically by name or even worse, if I forget you altogether. Know that to everyone that has made a contribution to this book, I am extremely grateful.

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Thank you for reading my excerpts. *A Tour of the Heart: A Seductive Cycling Trip to France* (ISBN-13: 978-1479134366) is now available in paperback at bookstores nationwide. If you don't see it on the shelf, be sure to ask your bookseller to order it. You can also purchase it on amazon in both paperback (http://www.amazon.com/Tour-Heart-Seductive-Cycling-Through/dp/1479134368/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1348773408&sr=1-1&keywords=a+tour+of+the+heart:++a+seductive+cycling+trip+through+france) and as an ebook on kindle (http://www.amazon.com/Tour-Heart-Seductive-Cycling-ebook/dp/B009W87P9A/ref=pd_rhf_ee_p_t_2). It will be available on iBooks and Nook by late January 2013.

As you can imagine, there's much more contained within the 272 pages of this book. *A Tour of the Heart* is copyrighted, so if there's anything you'd like to use for your own purposes, please contact me at maribethclemente@me.com.

If you have any comments, you may also email me at the above address or post it on my blog, www.bonjourcolorado.com, at <http://bonjourcolorado.com/welcome-to-a-tour-of-the-heart/>.

Thank you for your interest in *A Tour of the Heart!*

XO,

Maribeth