



modern times

Strangers on a train

Forget the 70s suburban wife-swapping image: there's a new breed of swingers out to recruit smart, stylish women just like you. *eve* writer Pamela Whitby, 32, was propositioned on a train by an attractive, educated couple one average Tuesday morning. Here's what happened next...

Photograph: Jo Miles

I first noticed them on the platform at Charing Cross tube station and, in the way you might acknowledge attractive strangers, I briefly held their gaze. I probably even smiled. She was tall, slender, blonde; he looked handsomely Italian, probably late 20s, early 30s. When we got on the Tube they sat opposite and observed me without a hint of self-consciousness. Was it my leather jacket that they were admiring? Had my mascara run? Did I know them? There was good deal of smiling and whispering. She took a notebook out of her bag and scribbled something down in pencil.

As they got up for their stop, they cheerily handed

me the piece of paper. It read 'Three's a charm...' and then gave an email address.

As soon as I got home, I asked my partner what he thought it all meant. 'Blimey,' he replied, confirming my suspicions. 'I think there's a bit of swinging going on in Clapham.'

I felt slightly uneasy, but also intrigued by this couple who might easily have been my friends. If they were swingers, then they certainly didn't fit the image I had of middle-aged suburbanites in outsize pants rekindling a flagging sex life.

Up until that day swinging for me was something I did with my two-year-old daughter in the park or >

something I'd vaguely planned to do from a chandelier with my partner. I emailed them back, declaring my interest as a writer and my desire to know more. Next day I set up a decoy Hotmail account and tapped out the line: 'How does it work?'

'It's simple. Meet us outside Clapham South station at 8pm. We'll have a few drinks... Red or white?'

It seemed straightforward enough, except it was Valentine's Day and my partner had surprised me with oysters and fine wine that had arrived on an overnight train from Scotland for a romantic night in. That's how I planned to keep it, so I politely declined.

But this was the beginning of a literate, friendly and, at times, seductive email correspondence. I found out that Carys was 23 and Johnny 27. They were both graduates – she a biochemist, he a surveyor. They'd been together two years and swinging for most of that time.

'You have to be secure if you want to swing,' says Carys. 'I want to do this as much as Johnny. Probably more so. If he wanted sex with somebody else my only complaint would be that he hadn't invited me.'

Johnny tells me they only started swinging when they met each other. 'It was Carys's sexual confidence that really did it for me,' he offers. 'Previous girlfriends were threatened by my interest in other women but with Carys it was different. It's fantastic to explore my fantasies with her.'

Their first encounter was a threesome with Carys' best friend. No regrets on this score but the first rules, essential for safe swinging, were set after that. Any future encounters would be with strangers. Their sexual shopping list went as follows: the older woman; beauty and sensuality a pre-requisite;



Will Pamela Whitby take on the swinging challenge? Maybe she should try out a Fever Party (right)

parties are held in upmarket venues around London and Manchester for glamorous straight couples and single women (no single men allowed). 'When I started swinging in the 90s there were some lovely, sophisticated clubs on the continent. But in the UK there was still a high "yuk" factor, especially for women,' he says.

He and a group of like-minded professionals decided to set up Fever to fill the gap in the upper end of the swinging market.

Fever Parties have proved so popular, says Mark, that they now employ a strict entrance system – you have to be under 40, attractive and willing to submit a photograph and be vetted by a panel of judges. Held in luxurious venues, with perfumed rooms and several double beds, the parties offer 'safe sex you'll never forget,' says Mark. The average age of a Fever woman is 27.

It seems a bit cheeky to point out that, aged 40, Mark will soon be banished from his own parties, but a visit to www.feverparties.com shows they have thought of everything. Parties for couples where one in the equation is up to 50 are coming soon.

So is Middle England ready for this? I call Martin

Shanghai Decadence, is reported to be planning to bring her enterprise to London, Rome and Paris this year. Take Out parties end early, she says: 'People get too horny to hang around'. And at home time, people leave in twosomes, threesomes and foursomes.

So, I've got a drawer full of Calvin Klein undies and a floaty silk number as seen on Jade Jagger – but could I be cool enough to swing? From what I've seen so far, I'm not so sure.

Matthew, 31, an ex-University researcher who now runs a web-hosting business, and Hannah, 32, a business analyst, disagree. Like me they have a Radio 4 habit, a car, a child and a mortgage. Hannah practises yoga and is a keen runner. They have been swinging for seven years and tell me that what started as fantasy is now a way of life.

'We are completely secure with one another. It heightens the pleasure of sex to be able to talk so openly about what we both want,' says Matthew.

However they insist swinging doesn't dominate their relationship. 'Certain intimacies we save for each other,' says Matthew. 'Sundays in bed reading the papers, cuddles on the sofa, spontaneous gifts. Our relationship is rock solid; we're very much in love.'

He sounds convincing, but many experts disagree with him. Paula Hall, psycho-sexual therapist at Relate, points out that, though all the swingers I've met seem confident, happy people, often the desire to swing hides an underlying problem whereby either party needs to prove they're still attractive. 'What happens when you're 80 and nobody wants to swing with you?' she asks.

Sex psychologist Petra Boynton adds that, in many couples she's encountered, the men enjoyed the experience, but the women are more reluctant – fearing they'll lose their partner if they don't join in.

'People do have successful open relationships, but they should be aware that they can unleash many insecurities and worries. If you have any doubts, or haven't discussed every possibility first with your partner – from what you would do if you suddenly went off the idea in the middle of an encounter, to what would happen if one of you fell in love – then I'd advise you not to do it.'

Despite being flattered by my proposition on the train, that advice is more than enough for me. □

“Held in luxurious venues, with perfumed rooms and double beds, they offer 'safe sex you'll never forget'”

somebody outside their social circle, no strings, and no men. I was flattered that they said I fell into the beauty category – but, at 32, not so chuffed about the 'older' woman part. I was also a little disconcerted at being purely an object of desire.

'We'd really like to meet, if you can swing it. There is not enough of this new thing happening,' emailed Johnny. Again, I declined, making a joke about being tempted if I was single, and asking if I could stay in touch for research purposes.

But Johnny's words stayed with me. What did he mean about 'This New Thing'? From what I had seen so far, Seventies, suburbs and Cinzano had given way to a whole new approach, a whole new look and new self-confidence in the world of swinging.

I'd read about Fever Parties (which hit the headlines earlier this year when it was reported that senior Tory strategist Dougie Smith was one of the co-founders) and decided to investigate further.

I call up one of the organisers, Mark (who did not want to give his surname). He tells me the

Raymond, director of consumer trend forecasting company Future Laboratory, who says attitudes are definitely opening up. 'People are increasingly distinguishing between sex and love. Like shopping, sex is now a leisure activity in its own right,' he says. Raymond recently researched several of these upmarket one-nighters in clubs in London and Manchester, and found a huge interest not only in sex but in top-end labels. 'Prada, Gucci, Coco de Mer. Even the champagne was Cristal or Krug.'

Interestingly, says Raymond, the whips and rubber element was totally absent. 'It's not about being seedy – the *Fiesta* or *Razzle* view of sex – nor is it about fetishism. It is not even ultimately about sex, although that is on the agenda. We saw city professionals giving out business cards, no fake names being used. Everybody had a shared sense of recreation, without anyone feeling compelled to take things further.'

In the States, the country that in 2002 bought us hedonistic girl-powered sex parties such as Cake, the hottest incarnation of the new swinging scene