

MINDY LEWIS

## TWO TONGUES

*Merci* Skype, as Patrick would say, the software program that enables us to speak for free, any hour of the day or night. I plug in my earphones for sound so crystal clear I can hear the train whistling as it passes through Patrick's Parisian suburb and he can hear the car alarms on Amsterdam Avenue that remind him of the legendary howls of my late cat Henry, whom Pat has dubbed *Monsieur Henri*. Animals play a major role in our communication. Pat's Skype icon is Fanfan, a soulful looking dog who belonged to his former girlfriend and whom he calls "*ma fille*" (my daughter). In the photo, Fanfan looks up at him with adoring brown eyes. My icon is a little grey and white kitten I photographed on the bridge to *Ile de la Cité* two summers ago when Pat and I were reunited in Paris for the first time since having met briefly fifteen years before, surprised to find ourselves on the threshold of a big, strange, long-distance romance.

"My Miiiiin!" ("Meen" he pronounces it.) Pat's voice is animated and happy. "It is so good to hear you. How are you, my love?"

"OK," I hedge, then change the subject and ask how he is, but he can read the sound of my voice.

"My Min, I feel you are not well."

I try to explain that I've been feeling depressed and powerless, working hard and having little creative time for myself. I am also frustrated by our geographical distance, the six-hour time difference that makes communication difficult, and the challenge of expressing ourselves, our thoughts and our daily lives in *deux langues*—two different languages—literally, two tongues. All of the above are weighing heavily on me, and as I speak to him, I'm surprised to find myself starting to cry. Until this moment, I hadn't realized how alone I've felt since Pat returned to Paris only two weeks ago. It seems more like two months.

The distance between us dissolves as Pat responds to my words.

"My Min, I think of you all the day, all the night, when I ride my *vélo* (bike) I think of you, *mon bébé*, alone in New York City working so hard for

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make money for live, for teach, for create. My Min I think of you like a fool. *Tu me manques beaucoup! Mon petit chat.*”

I intuitively understand his mixture of French and English, which I sometimes have to translate when we're with friends. For instance, the English word “fool” which Patrick uses so often in conversation, sometimes means foolish, but can also mean *crazy*— as in “I am crazy about you.”

Pat, who teaches at an art college in Paris, understands how depleting it can be to focus on the creative progress of others, and how easy it becomes to neglect one's own work. For him, as for me, life without creative work is just as empty—*vide*—as life without love.

With each word he speaks, my stalled inner engine begins to rev up.

“You must write about what you live now, not some big story, but your real life. This story between us is the story you live now. You must write about this far away love story where each day you change how you feel, when I live with you and when I am far away. My love, you must read Proust, he write a story from nothing, no great story but the life he live every day. You must read this book, even if just a few sentences each day.”

When I ask Pat which volume he recommends I read first, we go around in circles. “Swann's Way?” I ask three times. “*C'est difficile de traduire,*” he says, “...*un moment...*” By the concentrated silence I can tell he's using his little hand-held translator, the same size and shape as a calculator, which he works with his thumbs. He returns with a 5-word title in which I recognize the name Swann. “Yes,” I say, “Swann's Way.” Like Proust, we've taken the long route, requiring many words to say something simple, which often turns out to be more complex than you'd think.

But even though we speak two tongues, Pat understands me, the essential me. We're a pretty good match: he is a painter who understands writing, and I am a writer who understands painting. *Voilà!* He laughs whenever I say that word, which I do too often, and when I over-enunciate my throaty French *rrrrr*'s trying to sound authentic, and when I commit countless other verbal *faux pas*.

“*Je vais cracher dans le lit,*” I said during one of Pat's visits, very tired after a long day of visiting museums. Pat looked at me incredulously

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before bursting out laughing. “You know what you say?” What I’d wanted to say was “I’m going to ‘crash’ in the bed.” (This was partly his influence; he often uses the word “crash” in inventive ways: I “crash” my brain, I “crash” my body.) Instead, I’ve said “I’m going to spit in the bed” (*cracher* the onomatopoeic sound of clearing the throat before hacking). A prime example of the *faux ami*, or false friend—an English word that exists in French but which means something entirely different. I’m filled with *faux amis*. If I say something in jest, and he doesn’t get it or thinks I’m serious, I say: “*Je geste*.” Pat listens to this dozens of times before correcting me. “When you say ‘je geste’ it means (he moves his arms and hands) like this... *Je geste!* (I gesture). What you must say is ‘*Je plaisante*.’”

Fool! Idiot! *Merde!* How can I take myself seriously when I say such ridiculous things?

“You are like a child,” he says to me affectionately, and I bristle, feminist signals flashing. Yet isn’t it nice to be loved for one’s flaws rather than one’s supposed perfection? How refreshing to be seen through, pomposity transparent, vanity disarmed? To be loved drooling on one’s pillow, *sans maquillage* (makeup), *avec les cheveux sauvages?* (Wild hair—or *hairs*, as he puts it—another favorite mistranslation.)

We find many things adorable in the other. He actually likes how I look in my bike helmet (*casque*), and I like the fact that he showers before bedtime and smells so sweet and clean when he gets into bed. Similarly, I love that he adds “Isn’t it?” tacked onto the end of sentences. (“We go now. *Isn’t it?*”) I don’t correct him, and he adopts my whimsical inventions. So neither of us learns much, but we keep each other amused.

Pat always speaks English to me, even when I beg him to speak French. He feels it would be disrespectful not to. I generally speak French to him, partly because I want to practice, and partly because it’s easier for him to understand me. When on occasion he gives in and speaks French, he speaks v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y and enunciates too clearly as if I really were a child, or an *idiot* (pronounced *id-e-ob*) and I have to smile at the shoe being on the other foot for a change.

Because it can take so many words to express our thoughts, we stick to simple expressions, but sometimes surprise ourselves by being able to

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communicate thoughts of great complexity. Especially with the help of a little *vin rouge*. When it's really important, even without words, we intuit what the other is thinking and feeling. At times, the language difference becomes transparent and even disappears, so I no longer know which we're speaking.

"*Comment vas-tu?*" I ask him in a late night/NY, early morning/France Skype call.

"Not very well," he says, "I feel you are not good today, I just feel this." He's right on target, as usual. "I am like Fanfan," he says of himself. "I feel direct what you feel, without speak. And I love."

We do pretty well most of the time, except when we're tired, or *fatigués*—fatigued. I'm happy when I find a French connection, a root word, in English. And there are many! I'm heartened by these *vrais amis*—true friends—because they strengthen our connection. But sometimes, weary of my solitary life and the months spent apart, I fear we're *faux amis*, that this relationship can't last, can't survive the distance, the labor of constant translation, the stress of being on time for our Skype calls that give us the illusion of presence.

When we're tired, we get into misunderstandings. "It's your life!" Pat repeats again and again one night in a late night discussion when I express how disheartened I've become by the challenge of keeping up with ever-changing technology. "If you do not learn, you stop earn *monnaie*. But it's your life." I feel betrayed by the dismissive phrase, and he is mystified by my hurt reaction. Only the next day do we unravel that his meaning was meant to be more objective: "It's your choice. You're free to decide." It seems to me that men and women speak different languages anyway. Might as well be French and English—the difference more apparent, forgivable, ornamental. Shaken by such sudden towers of Babel, we resolve not to get into complicated discussions—especially about technology—late at night.

*Deux langues*. Two tongues. Implies something sexy, like French kissing (as if the French invented kissing!)—but that is a *cliché*. There are so many ways to kiss. We are sexy together, he and I. We don't always French kiss. But we enjoy one another, and take our time, frequently, to make deep

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love.

To keep our strength up, we eat. We eat regular meals (the French, friends tell me, are like that) that begin with wine (glasses carefully filled to exactly the same level), a main course, then the *salade*, followed by bread and cheese, coffee or tea, and a little dessert: *un morceau de chocolat* and some *yaourt vanille* (pronounced *vanneeye*). Pat especially likes French Vanilla—which, like French fries, they don't have in France—because it comes in a large American container emblazoned with a smiling cow sporting a jaunty blue *béret*. He loves American packaging, especially Campbell's Tomato Soup cans (homage to Andy Warhol). When he's here he hoards a little stockpile of empty, washed containers which I later throw out when he can't fit them into his suitcase: soup cans, milk cartons, yogurt containers, the round Quaker Oats box, and stacks of paper bags that he collects not only for the store logos but because the paper (which makes good drawing paper) is thick American brown paper, unlike the delicate wafer-thin paper bags I find irresistible when I shop in Paris. Personally, I prefer the individual yogurts sold in *supermarchés* in six packs of little glass jars, in flavors like kiwi and coconut, which I take time to savor spoonful by creamy spoonful (again, the French take their time enjoying modest portions, unlike we gluttonous Americans).

He loves all things American, and I, all things French. His taste in music runs to American electric blues—he is a Jimi Hendrix devotee—but also, to my dismay, extends to pop groups like Bon Jovi. But we both adore Piaf, and ever since Pat taught me the words, I am just as prone to fervently sing aloud *La Marseillaise* as Pat is *The Star Spangled Banner*, which he hums with swelled chest and hand on heart. He revels in the energy and freedom of New York City (as opposed to Paris, which he finds stiflingly provincial) and is fascinated by its towering glass and steel buildings, just as I have an aversion to skyscrapers and love that in Paris the buildings are low and old and you can see the sky. But when Pat is in New York, I come out of seclusion and enjoy the city with him, a tourist in my own town. We frequently bike downtown to Chelsea galleries and Greenwich Village, and take in more museums during his three-week visits than I normally see in months

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on my own.

Last year, on one of our jaunts downtown, we stopped at the site of the Twin Towers, which I hadn't visited since the days when the awful smell of destruction still hung in the air. Pat took extensive photographs, and we both stood speechless at the memorial exhibition. When we returned home that evening, Patrick sat in an armchair in my living room and wept.



In the spring of 1991, the Gulf War had reached its peak, and because of terrorist threats (little did we know the prescience of those events), airfares had fallen drastically. I'd always wanted to go to Paris, and so I impulsively bought a dirt-cheap round trip ticket and booked a hotel from *Let's Go France*. As fate would have it, two weeks before my departure I received a letter from an old friend who happened to be teaching in Paris at the École des Beaux Arts, which had loaned him a huge apartment opposite the Louvre where he invited me to stay. While my friend worked in his studio, I spent my days walking from museum to museum, down leafy promenades, stopping at cafés to refuel and massage my blisters—well-earned mementos of my determination to drink in as much of this gorgeous *ville* (and *vie*) as I could in my 2-week stay, and to do it *à pied*. When I tired of walking the city on my own, I phoned a woman painter I'd met in New York and made a date for lunch at a Chinese restaurant. "Do you mind if I bring my boyfriend?" she asked.

It was good to see Christianne again, *très chic* in her short cropped hair, leather jacket, t-shirt and Keds; a matched pair with her tall, leather jacketed, dark-haired, intense-eyed, soft-spoken boyfriend, Patrick (pronounced *Patrique*; the English spelling is common in France). After ordering—the menu was in Chinese and French—the conversation turned to art, and we chatted over noodles and tea. We talked for two hours, and when we rose for our double-cheeked goodbye kisses, I asked Christianne if she'd like to join me one afternoon at a museum. "*Non, merci*," she replied, explaining that it was finals week at her university, "but maybe Patrick would like to join you."

We arranged to meet in the *librairie* of the Musée Beaubourg, the

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MOMA of Paris, sticking out like a sore thumb with its ultra modern, scaffolding-encased design. I stood in the bookstore at the appointed hour, wondering why I felt so nervous—after all, Patrick had a girlfriend. I had dressed down for the occasion, in my most humble, slightly torn T-shirt and jeans to enhance my bohemian aspect and to seem less like a bourgeois American tourist, not imagining that my outfit instantly identified me as such. I was leafing distractedly through a volume of Brancusi's sculptures when Patrick arrived by my side like a whisper. As I looked up into his intense, pale face, I wished I could find someone like him, a poetic, soft-spoken, leather-jacketed, artist boyfriend of my own.

The featured exhibition was André Breton and his consortium of visual punsters that included Marcel Duchamps and his alter ego, *Rrrrose Selavie* (a pun on *Eros, c'est la vie*). We took our time scrutinizing the classic works of surrealism, enjoying their mind-tickling visuals. Patrick pointed out things I would have otherwise missed. As he bent to hear my comments, his hair brushed my cheek, causing me to shiver. Before we left the museum, we ventured out onto one of the walkways that offered magnificent panoramic views of the city, but as I poised my camera, I discovered I was out of film (a pre-digital dilemma). "*Donne-moi ton adresse,*" Patrick said, and promised to return to take a shot and mail it to me.

Thus began a correspondence that continued for the next two years. Each time I discovered a letter from Patrick in my mailbox, I'd rush upstairs, lock the door behind me, and settle down with my French-English dictionary to decode his block-printed pages illustrated with little drawings of Disney characters: he, a mischievous Mickey Mouse, and I, a bashful Minnie. After reading each letter over and over, I'd stash them in a special corner of my desk reserved just for them. Occasionally he included black and white photos of the cats and dogs of Paris, and eventually, the promised view from Beaubourg. Over time, our letters grew longer. He informed me that he and Christianne had broken up, and I wrote to him about my father's decline from Parkinson's disease. Our correspondence became a beacon in my otherwise disastrous romantic life. However contentious, painful or short-lived my real-life relationships were, my

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relationship with Patrick was pure: a sublime mix of unconsummated desire and exalted emotion.

When Patrick invited me to visit him the following summer, to stay with him in his house outside of Paris with “*le petit ruisseau*” (the little stream), and then travel by motorcycle through Provence and visit Matisse’s stained glass chapel, my fantasies grew to great proportions. I imagined us flying through the French countryside on his motorcycle, my arms wrapped around his leather-clad body. I imagined us in bed together, lovingly entwined after sex. I imagined all this and more in a fever pitch of excitement.

Then I grew afraid. It was too much, too overwhelming. I was terrified, though I couldn’t say exactly of what. I became utterly mired, unable to bring myself to answer his letter. Night after night I couldn’t sleep. Daytime was an agony of indecision. Finally, one evening, I phoned Patrick and awakened him in the middle of the night (I’d forgotten about the time difference), but I was so upset, I couldn’t get the words out. Eventually I wrote a letter saying I couldn’t come, and apologized for disappointing him. I moped around in a state of grief, as if someone had died, but with an added measure of guilt—as if by giving in to my fear, I had murdered my own capacity to love.

Amazingly, our correspondence continued. I tried to explain in a letter my excessive fearfulness in relationships and life in general—how easily overwhelmed I was by noise, by crowds—as if my own self could be consumed and obliterated. I confided how much sadness this caused me, this need to remove myself in order to exist. He wrote back that he understood, that he too felt alone in his life by his own need and his own choice. We were even closer now, our correspondence on a deeper level. My father died shortly after the summer, and when I wrote of this devastating news to Patrick, he surprised me with a telephone call, his voice filled with concern. Later, he sent me a long letter describing his grief at the death of his grandmother. We began planning another trip for the following summer. This time I was determined. Nothing would stop me.

But life intervened. Without warning I met a young man in Riverside

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Park, and our love blossomed along with the apple, cherry, and magnolia trees. Once again, I had a difficult letter to write. Patrick assured me he understood. But our letters dwindled, and then stopped.

My new relationship was doomed from the start. En route to our summer vacation in Maine, I listened to French language tapes in the car. My new love was not amused. We argued volubly at night in our hotel with its paper-thin walls, and battled our way through the next two years. After a painful breakup, I signed up for French lessons.

In the late-90s, I received a letter from Patrick in which he cordially informed me that he had a new girlfriend, and enclosed a photo of him hiking in the French Alps, his now salt-and-pepper head bowed as he climbed uphill, probably taken by his girlfriend while on holiday together. *That could have been me*, I thought with sharp regret, and filed the letter deep in the recesses of my desk. As penance, I took every opportunity to practice my French with Haitian cabdrivers and a cute blond Christmas tree vendor who came down from Montreal each November and camped out in a van parked behind the stand of fragrant firs assembled on the corner of Broadway and 94th Street.

A week or two after September 11th, 2001, I opened my mailbox and withdrew an envelope addressed in familiar block printing. Inside was a hastily written note from Patrick asking if I was OK. I wrote back to tell him I was fine, still emerging like everyone else from the shock and grief of 9/11. Soon thereafter he emailed me the website of the Paris art gallery he now showed with. We emailed a few times, and he hinted that he was not happy in his by then 3-year-long relationship. I confessed that I too was having doubts in a relationship that had begun well enough but was turning out to be markedly lacking in passion on my part.

When I was invited to teach a writing workshop in Provence in the summer of 2006, I knew immediately that a rare opportunity had arrived to uncoil the snake of regret that had been lodged within me these past fifteen years. This time, I resolved, whatever the outcome, I would face the unknown and bear the consequences, even if it just meant expressing my

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regret, offering explanation, and saying goodbye forever to my fantasy.

We agreed to meet in Paris, where I had arranged to stay in my own little *pied à terre*. I was doubly excited, knowing I would not only reconnect with Patrick, but with the city herself in all her amorous beauty. Like many a traveler, I was returning to Paris to reclaim something, some part of myself that had gotten lost. The part, perhaps, that believes in lasting love and that remembers what it is to feel something beyond the imperatives of daily life. As Patrick would say as we sat and talked that first evening in Paris: “*Tu es allée à Paris pour retrouver la vraie Mindy.*” (“You have come to Paris to rediscover the real Mindy.”) He didn’t trust his English, and his words dawned slowly on me.

From the moment I had arrived at Orly, there were magic signs. After my flight was delayed an hour and a half, I wasn’t even sure Patrick would be there to meet me, or if I’d recognize him after fifteen years. So I was unprepared for the sight of a rather ordinary looking, lanky, olive-skinned, grey-haired stranger hovering by the gate—a real live man, not the fantasy laden character I’d held in my mind. After a moment of tenuous recognition during which neither of us could find words beyond *bonjour*, we embraced with a kiss on each cheek, and my hair got tangled in his faint shadow of stubble, causing him to blush deeply—the first sign. Second, when we entered the blazing heat of the parking lot, he plucked a sprig of fragrant lavender from an otherwise barren, cigarette-butt littered planter and handed it to me. And third: We set out in his broiling car, but the usual Parisian gridlock was so extreme that we were forced to ditch the car (miraculously finding a parking place), and when we emerged from the Metro, the first thing we saw was a bride and bridegroom emerging from a pretty little *église*.

Just as I was snapping photos of the wedding entourage with my digital camera, Patrick’s cell phone rang. As he answered it, I turned to take a candid shot of him, which he caught out of the corner of his eye. I felt mortified to be perceived as a crass, invasive American tourist, and as soon as he ended his call, I apologized and offered to erase the photo. He later would tell me that was the moment he started to fall in love with me. We spent

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the evening in my cozy apartment, talking over *vin rouge, baguette, et Roquefort*—(*très français!*)—and when Patrick rose to leave, what I thought I was offering as a friendly hug bloomed suddenly into a conduit of that life-affirming force that annihilates time and space.

Sitting in my kitchen in New York, I try to remember the rush and flow of the early days, to connect it with this tall thin stranger, hunched over his laptop wearing slippers and the same T-shirt he's worn the past four days, plunked down into my busy work day. Where is the man whose touch, light as breath, dissolved me? I try to remember the overwhelming emotions that flooded me as we talked and kissed our way through Paris, that thrill of discovery, of understanding, of creating our third language. Now, it's hard work, and translation. Every activity, every meal, requires planning, and sparks extensive explanation.

"Miin," he begins, and I bristle. What is he going to correct now? What aspect of my daily habits and routines, my behavior, my computer and bike riding skills, doesn't pass muster with male French scrutiny? Because of course he knows the right way to do everything. It's a miracle I could have survived all these years by myself. Fool American girl!

"Don't!" I admonish, when he starts to correct me, and later feel contrite.

When Pat visits, we live together in my one-bedroom apartment/home office for three to four weeks at a time—an adjustment for both of us after years of solitary living. In some ways we are opposites: I am impulsive; he, methodical. I'm nocturnal, while he keeps farmer's hours, made more extreme by jetlag. I like bright light, while Pat, in classic French style, snaps off the lights each time he leaves a room, or else just sits in the dark. He is fantastically frugal, while I like to indulge myself from time to time. I enjoy eating in restaurants, while Pat prefers dining at the kitchen table, three times a day, at precisely prescribed hours. He can work patiently at his computer for hours, whereas when I need to get away from my desk, it can sometimes be with great urgency.

One day, after working all morning while Pat is out on his bike, I prepare

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our lunch at the appointed hour and await his return, surprised by an uncharacteristic lapse in his clocklike punctuality. After lunch, coffee, and cleanup, agitated at being indoors all day, I wait nearly an hour for him to finish his extensive grooming rituals (he is, after all, *très propre*). While he's in the bathroom, I do something to my computer that causes it to freeze and not restart. *That's it!* I crash my fist down onto my laptop, and then hurl every small electronic device I can find against the floor, my horror at my own behavior stoking the fire of self-loathing. Pat stands quietly watching, then bursts into sobs.

"*C'est trop difficile*," he weeps into my hair, and I fear he is right. Our relationship feels as broken as the shattered plastic mouse-parts on the floor.

"*Je veux, je veux...*" I hear myself repeating. "I want, I want." What is it that I want? When he's in France, I miss him terribly. When he's here, I want him to go. I'm so wrapped up in this relationship, I can't think, can't concentrate on work. It's as if my real self is being held hostage—I can't even remember who I was before he invaded my life. I no longer know which is more terrifying: a life of misunderstandings, negotiations, conflagrations and reconciliations? Or a life alone?

For the time being, at least, our lives are rooted on different continents by work and necessity. Any vision of a shared future is dimmed by the cost of airfare, the duress of long-distance travel, and extended periods of separation. With each visit, we live the entire arc of a relationship, and just when we get used to one another, it's back to being single—a state I thought I was used to. Coupledness, however, is truly foreign territory.

"Why do you love me when I'm so difficult?" I ask, shaken at how close I've come to destroying the fragile connection we'd waited decades to restore.

Pat wipes the tears from his cheeks, then mine. "I love you like a parent love a child, no matter what you do. I love the real Mindy, because you love purely, like Fanfan." As touched as I am, my contrary side can't resist. "I am not a dog!" I reply, and we both laugh.

After two years, the pattern of Pat's visits has become predictable: the escalation of excitement and dread as his arrival approaches, followed by

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my initial shock at the corporeal and emotional reality of the stranger at my door, giving way to recognition and delight. Then, a one-week honeymoon that veers suddenly into irritation at the constant attention I must pay to this foreign body, the sound of his voice in my ear, the recurring demand to plan activities and prepare meals, to pay attention.

“Min, *fais attention!*” Pat admonishes as I zoom along on my bike or rush precipitously ahead of him while crossing the street. Is my need to escape his presence so intense as to propel me into oncoming traffic? And what if I succeed? Is it so damn great living alone, where my habits rule, unchallenged? What pleasure is there in working, reading, or watching television late into the night, disrespecting my need for meals, for sleep, for civilizing companionship?

At night, I fall into bed exhausted, and burrow into the warmth and gravity of his presence. It’s as if I were supporting two psychic bodies—his and mine—with my own energy. How can there possibly be anything left over for creative work? This is the hard question: *Must I be alone in order to write?* In each day’s activities of our life together, the terms of this devil’s bargain irk and nag at me. At the same time, I’m deeply entrenched in the battle to forge a common language.

As I write this, Pat is in the kitchen at his computer researching NYC museums. Today is a snow day. We stay in, working on our computers, then go for a late afternoon walk in Riverside Park where the sun blazes blood orange, shimmering over the new snow. Pat stops to take photos of dogs wearing winter coats and booties, while I walk ahead. This trip, we’ve found a balance. Each day we take some time apart, and our time together is more relaxed. We are able to work separately, together, for long stretches, the only sound the clicking of computer keys. Then it’s time for a glass of wine, a meal, a hug, a caress.

I know that when Pat returns to Paris in two weeks I’ll be sorry to see him go, and my solitude will be a shock. For then, I will once again have to find civilization—*la civilisation*—within myself.

