

MINDY LEWIS



A Dirty Love Story

I HAVE A FRENCH BOYFRIEND. *Ooh la la!* Lucky me! We French kiss (among other things) in my rent stabilized, Upper West Side apartment where I've lived since 1971. In addition to being a writer, I'm also a graphic designer, a painter, and a pack rat who saves every trace of evidence of emotional connection, intellectual pursuit, and artistic endeavor. My apartment has, over the years, become a stratified piece of urban archaeology, a record of my past lives. You can imagine the clutter and the dust that it attracts. At a low point in the 1980s, I became allergic to my apartment. When I sold my first book, the first thing I did with the advance money was to go out and buy a Dust Buster and an air purifier.

Luckily, *mon amour*, Patrick (*Patrique*, or Pat for short), loves me. He loves my cluttered apartment, he loves my eccentricities, he loves my fractured French (and I love his fractured English), and he loves my long, abundant, wavy, 1960s-style hair.

"Miiin," (*Meen*, he pronounces it), "I love your long hairs." (The French term for hair—*les cheveux*—is plural, yet singular—each hair an individual deserving of *liberté* and *fraternité*, values I wholeheartedly share.) Patrick has even been known to pluck strands of my hair off his clothing, fold them in a piece of tissue, and stash them in his wallet. Once at the airport, one of my hairs escaped his grasp; a moment later he saw it floating in front of him and retrieved it from the air, delighted to carry a bit of my DNA back home with him.

Pat too has long hair, salt and pepper gone mostly gray, though when we first met it was black and curled poetically around his intense, handsome face.

We had come together against great odds: distance, decades, and disappointments. We'd first met in Paris in 1990, thanks to the Gulf War, precursor to another, even dirtier war. Back then, because of terrorist threats (who knew what was to come?) the price of airfare had dropped and I was able to afford an inexpensive round-trip ticket to Paris. There, through friends, I met Patrick: a tall, leather-jacketed, Vespa-riding artist. We spent four hours together at the Beaubourg, which offered panoramic views of Paris from its external walkways, and when I ran out of film (a pre-digital dilemma), Patrick offered to return with his camera and send me the photo. When we said *au revoir*, I sent up a prayer for a leather-jacketed, motorcycle-riding artist boyfriend like him.

After I returned to New York, I received a letter from Patrick, and eventually, the promised photo. I treasured Patrick's letters, which were often illustrated with little drawings: him as Mickey Mouse, and me, a bashful Minnie. Our letters became more frequent, and we began to sign them *Love*. Twice I made plans to visit Patrick in Paris, and twice life intervened. Our correspondence dwindled, then stopped. I stashed his letters in a corner of my desk. As consolation, I signed up for French classes.

In September 2001, while the dust of the Twin Towers was settling over Manhattan, I received a letter in Patrick's familiar hand, in which he asked if I was OK. I wrote back that I was fine, emerging like everyone else from the shock and grief of 9/11. Patrick was by this time in a long relationship (he dropped clues that he wasn't entirely happy), while I was working my way through a series of ill-fated boyfriends. I had never quite forgiven myself for failing to visit Patrick, and vowed that if the opportunity ever came again, I'd take it.

In the summer of 2006, I was invited to teach a workshop in the south of France. On my way there, I spent a few days in Paris. Patrick met me at the airport, and within a few hours, it became clear that this lanky gray-haired stranger and I had a lot to talk about. When we kissed good night, the touch of his warm hands made the hairs on my bare arms stand at attention.

Before Patrick's first visit to New York, I was relentless not only about cleaning my apartment, but also my own body. In between bouts of dusting, sweeping, and vacuuming (a rare event), I scrubbed, tweezed, shaved, buffed, oiled, and inspected my body for imperfections. I washed rugs and tossed things out of closets. My body, like my apartment, was a repository of past mistakes, disappointments, failed relationships. Here was a chance to start over, fresh and new. I wanted to begin cleanly, purely, hopefully, and not muck up this rare second chance with the detritus of the past. I wondered how Patrick would see me in the cool light of New York, and whether our passion could stand the strain of long distance, different cultures, and day-to-day reality.

I didn't have to worry. Our love took root and thrived in my cluttered apartment, and we continued to plumb the depths of romantic passion.

But with passion also came shyness. In those first days together, I was so self-conscious that I could only pee with the bathroom faucet running. And it wasn't just me. It soon became apparent that both of us were painfully clogged, not wanting to stink up our new love with the gross sounds and odors of bodily functions. The sound of the toilet flushing filled me with embarrassment. Even the fact of my embarrassment was embarrassing. Here I was, 55 years old, and blushing like a child.

Luckily for me, Patrick loved this aspect of my personality. It was like my apartment—out of fashion, homey, and more than a little bit quirky.

The plumbing in a pre-war high rise can be temperamental. In my building it is common for the water to be shut off several days in a row while old, leaky valves are being replaced. It's common for pipes to suddenly spring a leak, dripping from one apartment through the ceiling of the one below, for toilets to back up or flush unendingly, for pipes to clog. These inconveniences are the price one pays for the charm of old-fashioned faucet fixtures labeled HOT and COLD, hexagonal honeycomb ceramic floor tiles, and a large porcelain bathtub perfect for long meditative bubble baths.

Over the years, my bathroom sink had become frequently and persistently clogged. Doses of industrial strength Liquid Plummer and visits from the building's handyman, who'd appear at my door with his metal "snake," took care of the problem temporarily. But lately my sink had been slow.

Patrick peered down the drain, then asked me for a flashlight. "Hmm," he said, then went and rummaged around under the kitchen sink and returned with a coil of metal wire, which he fashioned into a foot-long fishing hook, then slid it down the hole, fished around for several seconds, and very slowly withdrew it.

I watched, horrified, as he began to pull out a glob of dark-brown, almost black, slimy goo. I watched as it kept emerging—the dark brown slime was held together by a mass of matted hair—my hair—coming out slowly in one long slimy, gooey blackish brown turd that just kept emerging inch after inch—six inches, one foot, two feet, three feet—until it was completely free, dangling in front of me, exactly like a three-foot long piece of *merde*. It was unbelievably disgusting. I gagged, fighting a sudden urge to throw up, yet I couldn't look away. It was like something out of a nightmare—this horrible, impossibly long, slimy thing emerging from a dark hole.

Playfully dangling the monstrous thing, Pat laughed, but I could tell he also was revolted. I was mortified, as if I'd taken a crap right in front of him. This was tangible evidence of my unconscious mind, of all the psychic content banished to dark places—each individual strand of hair shed over the 37 years of my life in this apartment, woven together and returning to haunt me like my own personal golem. At the same time, I felt an incredible, almost physical, sense of relief to see it dislodged from its hiding place into the light of day. Life was sending me a direct message: Be conscious—don't think you can just rinse your hairs down the sink and get rid of them forever. We leave our trace in this life, and no matter how diligently we clean or present ourselves to the world, our shed hairs and forgotten pasts can return to incriminate us when we least expect it.

We bagged it, put it out with the trash, opened a bottle of red wine, and I did my best to banish the disturbing image from my mind. But sometimes, as I gaze at my beloved, the image of the thing in the sinkhole looms in my imagination.