

“Our Little Jewish Girl”

MINDY LEWIS

My boyfriend’s mother and I fell in love at first sight. She had stayed up late in her best dress and pearl necklace to welcome us after our long drive from Paris, with a bottle of champagne and a *gateau charlotte* that had taken all afternoon to prepare.

“*Ma fille,*” she said, as she kissed me on both cheeks and escorted us into her cozy living room. In her early 80s, white-haired Maman radiated ebullient energy but walked with difficulty. Grasping my arm, she led me to a corner table, where framed photos of Patrick and me were arranged atop lace doilies. I was touched to be called her daughter.

Patrick and I had fallen in love in Paris the previous July in a whirlwind romance strong enough to bridge the 3,600 miles between us. Since then, Patrick has visited me several times in New York. This was the first time we’d visited his mother in her apartment in Mouans-Sartoux, a village on the outskirts of Cannes.

At the dining-room table, we toasted to *santé* and *amour* and polished off the champagne and the *charlotte*. Maman had made up the guest bedroom, and Pat and I stood arm in arm at the open window. In the distance, lights twinkled

from the hillside city of Grasse, a major manufacturer of French perfume. Closing my eyes, I could almost catch a whiff of its scent in the sultry night air.

"*Ma petite fille,*" Maman greeted me in the morning—which struck me as humorous, being that I was in my mid-50s, stood 5 foot 8 inches and weighed 150 pounds. Patrick was in the kitchen making coffee, morning sunlight flooded in from the balcony, and I felt serenely happy.

"*Ma petite fille,*" Maman murmured, both of us teary-eyed when we kissed goodbye a few days later. As we drove away, she waved a white *mouchoir* from the balcony until she faded from view, and from the ache in my chest I knew I now had a real French *maman*.

Since his father died eight years ago, Patrick has phoned his mother every evening. I have to admit this worried me a little, at first. (A 55-year old man, never married, who phones his Maman *chaque soir*? Hmm.) While this doesn't exactly jive with the image of the Vespa-riding, leather-jacketed artist I fell in love with, I admire him for being so devoted, and tell him so. "She is an old woman, all alone," he shrugs. (Patrick is an only child, with no close relatives, and he and Maman have only each other.)

Patrick often calls me just after phoning his mother. After exchanging endearments and news, I inquire about Maman, and he recounts highlights of their conversation, which invariably include her physical ailments, the nightly news, and me.

"*Comment va notre petite fille?*" Maman routinely asks, and Pat will share an amusing story about my stressed-out life in New York City or some absurd thing I've said in my fractured French.

Then Maman embellishes her term of endearment once again.

"*Comment va notre petite fille juive?*" Pat reports Maman had asked that evening.

"Our little Jewish girl?"

Surprised by my shocked reaction, Patrick explains that he and Maman had both watched a documentary about Anne Frank on French television. Afterward, they discussed the program by phone, both of them profoundly moved. That's when Maman dubbed me "our little Jewish girl."

Patrick insists that she said this with affection as they communed over their newfound appreciation of Jewishness—a touchy subject in France—for which I am now the medium. An unlikely medium! I am not religious, and like many of my friends, I maintain a personalized secular/spiritual Jewish identity. I do not belong to a synagogue, and I observe religious holidays in my own way, embracing some rituals and rejecting others. So I'm surprised to find myself cast as a kind of Jewish cultural ambassador.

Early in our relationship, Patrick told me I was only the third Jewish person he's known. The first was a boy he knew from university, from a religious family. Their friendship made Patrick conscious of the anti-Semitic images he'd absorbed as a child (e.g. Jews with horns, who drank the blood of Christian children). Even though Patrick is educated and his father served as a special agent for the Resistance, somehow these absurd medieval myths were still in the air when Patrick was growing up in the 1950s and '60s. In his strictly Catholic community, *les Juifs* (or, more respectfully, *les Israelites*) were unknowable, shadowy outsiders.

Patrick's second Jewish friend is Dominique, the wife of his old friend Gerard, a huge, round epicurean of a man. Every August, we're invited for Sunday lunch at their house, along with a few family members and close friends, to partake in an eight-hour-long *grande bouffe*. As dishes appear on the table and glasses fill and empty, the conversation and laughter become raucous and I no longer care whether or not I comprehend what's being said, nor if it's at the expense of the American girlfriend who mistakes the glass of pear brandy for water and has to be pounded on the back.

Because Dominique is Jewish, I imagined that we might share a special affinity. From conversations with Patrick, I knew that Dominique's father was the only one of his brothers to survive the Holocaust, and that she and her brother were all that remained of a once large family. Their grandfather and seven uncles had all perished in Auschwitz, and a street in their town was named in their honor. Still, Dominique seemed uncomfortable whenever I broached the subject of Jewishness.

The third time I attended one of their Sunday gatherings, Dominique showed me around her garden. Handing me a sprig of lavender, she told me she has never been in a synagogue and that aside from her brother and deceased parents, she knows no other Jews. There is no synagogue in her village, all of her friends are Christian or atheist, and her children have been brought up observing Christian holidays but without formal religious education. To Dominique, being Jewish is dangerous, something you can be ostracized or killed for, and to admit it would be inviting trouble. Why connect yourself to an identity you have no positive experience of and know little about? The French version of "Don't ask, don't tell."

"It is different for you," she said, taking a drag of her cigarette. "In New York, there are many Jewish people. But here, I know no one."

She had a point. In New York City, it's easy to be Jewish; here, nearly everyone understands *mishegas*, *meshuganeh*, and *gezundheit* and is familiar with Nathan's kosher hot dogs. I've gotten a whiff of anti-Semitism when visiting less diverse parts of the U.S., but never have I lived in an environment where Jews were an actively discriminated-against minority.

"*C'est dommage*," I said to Dominique. "You must visit me in New York."

I envisioned Dominique in synagogue on the High Holy Days, surrounded by Jewish families, or experiencing the

sense of community on Shabbat. I wonder if she'd be moved by the liturgical music (how strange the Hebrew chanting would sound). I imagined bringing her to a Seder where she could taste traditional Jewish cooking, drink wine and converse with Jewish New Yorkers who would welcome the opportunity to practice their French.

When I was growing up, I knew only one French person: my friend Didi's mother. Ginette had dark eyes and hair and spoke in an alluring, throaty accent. There was something romantic about Ginette and her American husband that set them apart from my mother's other friends.

During one of Patrick's visits to New York, a childhood friend invited us over for dinner with Ginette. It was wonderful to see her again, by then in her 80s but still vital, and still very French: after over half a century in the U.S., she had not lost her accent. The two compatriots immediately clicked and were soon rattling away in their native tongue.

For decades, Ginette had preferred not to discuss the war years, but now, prompted by Patrick's questions, she recounted how, as a 16-year-old girl living in Paris in 1942, she was arrested and sent to Drancy, the internment camp known to be the last stop before deportation to the death camps. After three weeks, desperate that she'd be sent to Auschwitz, she approached a guard. "There has been a mistake! Can't you see that I am a true *française*?" she said with a persuasive smile. Charmed by the pretty French girl, he let her go. Ginette returned to live with her father, a Parisian tailor. One afternoon in 1943, he went out to the corner store to buy cigarettes, and never returned. Ginette learned he'd been arrested and deported to Auschwitz. Alone in occupied Paris, Ginette decided to go live with cousins in Marseille. There, at 18, she fell in love with an American G.I. The next year, they married and after the war, they settled in New York, raised a family, and later retired to Florida. With each move, she took with her a treasured

object: her father's prayer shawl.

Ginette never saw her father again. After all these years, she still did not know where, when or how he died—was he singled out in a selection and gassed at Auschwitz, or was he shot in transit, or did he succumb to typhus?

Patrick and Ginette exchanged some dialogue too rapidly for me to follow, then embraced. On our way home, Patrick explained he'd promised Ginette to go to the archives in Paris to obtain a copy of her father's death certificate and any other information that would shed light on when and how he died. When he returned to France, he kept his promise.

"*C'est incroyable*," he reported by phone, "thousands and thousands of files of people lost during the war." I could hear the tears in his voice.

After hours of searching, he found what he was looking for. Ginette's father, Isaac Kitmacher, was on the list of deportees sent by train to Auschwitz, but was never registered there. Either he had died on the journey or was killed immediately upon arrival. This information brought Ginette at least some degree of closure.

A few weeks later, Patrick visited Ginette's childhood address in Paris and sent her photographs of its exterior. "It is not much trouble to do," he tells me, "but it means so much to her." And I can tell it means a lot to him, too.

Patrick's first visit to New York coincided with the Jewish holidays. On Rosh Hashanah, we joined the local congregations assembled by the river to perform *Tashlich*, the casting away of sins in preparation for the New Year—one of the rituals I've claimed as my own. While I tossed breadcrumbs into the river, Patrick stood a distance away, taking photographs. After I'd tossed the last of my crumbs, I joined him.

"See the old couple by the tree? They look at me like I am a terrorist. I am afraid they will call the police."

Puzzled, I reassured him, privately thinking him *un petit peu paranoïaque*, but a moment later, the elderly couple turned and looked at Patrick with harsh, suspicious expressions. They probably find it disrespectful to take photographs of a solemn religious ritual on the High Holy days, I suggested. Or maybe—with his olive skin and craggy features, he does look somewhat Middle Eastern—they were suspicious of a potentially threatening outsider. This is not exactly a golden age of tolerance, in New York or in Paris.

Certainly the tensions around the Muslim presence in the U.S. are akin to those in France. On the streets of Paris, in the Metro and commuter trains, the racial tension is palpable; commuters sit with averted eyes, avoiding each other's gazes, and even 6 foot 4 inch Patrick is afraid to take the train home from Paris late at night. Every day brings news of violent protests and burning cars, reminding me of New York in the 1970s, when people regarded each other with suspicion, fear and hatred.

Each time we visit Maman, Pat and I take slow walks through her village, pausing to read plaques commemorating Napoleon, who passed through these same cobble-stoned streets. Once, Patrick pointed out some freshly scrawled graffiti in praise of Pétain, the notoriously anti-Semitic Vichy leader (surprising, since he died in 1951)—another reminder that in France, unlike in New York, I am “other,” as my eastern-European forebears were before me in Austria-Poland, as my grandfather was when he arrived in America, and as the North Africans are in today's France.

People coexist, but the tension is undeniable. On our way to the market, we pass a dark-skinned young woman on a narrow sidewalk. She seems startled by my smile and hesitates before shyly smiling back. Sitting stalled in traffic in Cannes, I catch a glint of proud hatred in the eyes of a young North African man who jaywalks in front of our car and slams his hand defiantly on the hood. From year to year, the Muslim presence is increasingly apparent in Maman's

village, where kebab restaurants line the streets. Directly across from her apartment is a *mosquée*, and at regular intervals we hear the call to prayer.

Patrick continues his self-education about anti-Semitism and adds to my own. At home in France, he watches *Schindler's List* a second time. Together in New York, we watch Louis Malle's *Au Revoir Les Enfants* and *Lacombe, Lucien*, among other French films that explore the issue directly or sub-textually: Joseph Losey's surreal *Mr. Klein*, Claude Berri's *The Two of Us*, and the heartbreaking *Jeux Interdits* (*Forbidden Games*). At climactic moments, we hold each other and weep.

On one of Patrick's early visits to New York, a friend invited us to an intimate Passover Seder—Patrick's first. When he admired the elegant table setting, my friend mentioned that she'd inherited the dishes from her grandmother. To our surprise, he burst into tears.

"*C'est rien*," he said, explaining that he was just profoundly moved by the sense of tradition.

Patrick's family is Catholic, but he hasn't been to church in decades. He's a self-proclaimed atheist, so it surprises me that he speaks often of God. "If God wants," he often says, referring to our possible future life together. After six years of long distance commuting, our future often seems as unknowable as the afterlife. But we have faith that we will find a way to be together.

The fact that I'm Jewish is as exotic to Patrick as his being French is to me. "I am happy to be with a Jewish woman," he declares. When I ask him why, he says that Jewish women are smart and warm—and sexy, he adds. When I point out that we Americans regard French women as the epitome of sexiness, he says cryptically "*Non, pas exactement*, not in the same way," but won't say more. I wonder in what way he means—the gauche, unsophisticated way? Or is it because we're emotionally expressive? I wonder if a new, positive stereotype has taken hold.

"I wish I were Jewish," Pat says over wine and *hors d'oeuvres* in my kitchen. I ask him why.

"Look at all the great Jewish scientists, mathematicians, writers, philosophers, doctors, lawyers. *Les Juifs sont tres intelligents!*"

"Yeah," I answer, "and neurotic, too!" But of course that's a generality.

"*Peut-être,*" he says. "But it's true. I love that you're Jewish; it brings you a human richness and a special sensitivity that I have never known before. I love your country because it is yours, I want to learn your language because it's yours. I love you completely."

My fear that Patrick may be harboring unconscious, hidden prejudices melts in the warmth of his love for me.

"I am your Jewish father," he says often. By this he means he worries about my wellbeing in a fundamental way: whether I've eaten or gotten enough sleep, or if I'm feeling well or depressed. "*Comment vas-tu, my love?*" he asks each time we talk on the phone.

As always, I attempt to conceal my stress with a euphemism. "*Mon Pat, aujourd'hui je suis un petit peu nerveuse.*" This always makes him laugh. He knows that "a little nervous" really means *absolument folle*.

This exchange has become part of his repertoire. When his mother asks how I am, he'll sometimes respond, "*Mon Pat, je suis un petite peu...*" at which Maman chimes in delightedly, "...*nerveuse!*"

I'm afraid she sees me as a kind of cartoon character: the silly American Jewish girl.

Patrick reassures me. "My mother loves you like a daughter. The first time we visit, she says to me, 'Mindy is the woman for you.'"

After dinner at Maman's apartment, Patrick asks me to explain to his mother why I think the Jews have been persecuted throughout history. I do my best to explain

in French that, in addition to their religious and cultural difference, Jews were forced to work at jobs looked down upon or forbidden—such as money lending—yet came to prosper in their new countries as bankers, merchants, tailors, butchers, and other professions, and that their prosperity and insularity evoked envy and suspicion.

Maman, who is hard of hearing, peers at me through her spectacles and nods dubiously.

"*Maman*, do you understand what Mindy just said?" Pat asks.

"*Ouuuuiii*," she begins slowly. "She said that people hate the Jews... *parce-qu'ils aiment trop l'argent?*"

Because they love money too much? Pat looks shocked but Maman seems to have no idea she's said anything wrong.

Pauvre Maman! Although her statement would offend me if uttered by anyone else, I am mostly embarrassed for her. I can't blame her for having absorbed a stereotype that's so deeply embedded in French culture. Yet her blooper betrays a pervasive prejudice that is not easily dismissed.

"*Aimez-vous l'or?* Do you like gold?" Maman asks out of the blue as we sit together in her living room. I'm startled. The verb *aimer* means both "to love" and "to like," so for a moment I think she's said "Do you love gold?"—a question that recalls her earlier *faux pas*.

I finally realize she's asking if I *wear* gold, possibly probing to see if I might like a piece of her jewelry. Partly to deflect this, I answer, "My mother wears gold, but I prefer silver."

"*Bon*," she says. She picks up her cane and walks into her bedroom, then returns with a small box containing a sleek silver necklace. "It's just costume jewelry, not real silver. But if you like it, it's yours."

I thank her and tell her it's lovely, and that I will think of her when I wear it. Still, from her expression, I can't help feeling I've let her down. She lets me off the hook.

"Ma petite fille," she says, "I have always wanted a daughter, and now I have you."

The next summer before visiting Maman down south, Patrick and I spend one day sightseeing in Paris. We head for Place des Vosges, a grand square with a park in the center, surrounded by buildings dating back to Henri VI. My goal is to visit the former home of Victor Hugo, now a museum. Each time I've visited Paris it's been closed for renovation, holidays, or some other reason. This time we're in luck.

We enter a suite of rooms decorated with velour and gold. The apartment is stuffy and baroque, but there are surprises. A showcase displays Hugo's correspondence with Samuel Cahen about the possibility of Hugo publishing Cahen's translation of "the Jewish Bible" (the Old Testament) from Hebrew into French, which Hugo apologetically declines because, he explains, with no knowledge of Hebrew, he would be unable to judge the quality of the translation. Hugo's letter of refusal seems genuinely sympathetic and respectful of Jewish culture. Later I learn of Hugo's admiration for the actress Sarah Bernhardt, whom he dubbed "The Divine Sarah," and his stand against the persecution of the Russian Jews.

Such currents of affinity and conscience are a salve for the prejudice, superstition and violence that thread through French history, from the atrocities committed during the Crusades and the mass murder of Jews during the Black Plague, to the establishment of more than 50 concentration and internment camps during World War II. Historically, France has had a long and complex relationship with its Jewish population—today the largest of any European nation—during which the Jews were repeatedly accepted, expelled, and welcomed back. For the past two centuries, Jews have been a source of controversy that has divided France: the polarizing eruption of anti-Semitic sentiment during the Dreyfus affair; Nazi collaboration and the

Vichy government, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain and supported by celebrities (Coco Chanel, Maurice Chevalier, and the actress Arletty among them) and by the Catholic Church; the trials of war criminals Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier and others—all simmering in the French collective unconscious.

When I broach the subject with friends, whether American or French, I often hear the same comments: “Oh, in France the bias is not just against the Jews, it’s against *all* outsiders.” Or, “It’s no different than anti-Semitism anywhere.” They point out that France has a tradition of humanitarianism and tolerance. “Don’t forget the Resistance! And Napoleon’s Declaration of Religious Freedom!” Remember, they say, the ordinary citizens who risked their lives to save Jews during the war; in one case, an entire village sheltered Jewish children. I am aware that France has produced and been home to many renowned Jewish artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, performers, philosophers, and statesmen. “They’ve even had a Jewish president, which is more than we can say for the U.S.! And don’t forget there are areas of the U.S. that are just as biased.”

True, all true. But this doesn’t diminish my awareness of strident anti-Jewish sentiment in France. The first time I visited Paris in 1991, I encountered fascist graffiti (*MORT AUX JUIFS!*) scrawled in the *Metro* and swastikas spray-painted on the sides of buildings—a searing impression that left me forever wary when I travel in France.

Even today, when bias speech is a criminal offense in France, the comedian Dieudonné continues to spew Holocaust-denial propaganda, and anti-Semitic postings on Twitter have gained attention in the press, while violent hate crimes—the 2012 shooting of four children in a Jewish day school in Toulouse; in 2013, a knife attack on a rabbi and his son in Paris; an incident in Marseilles where a 20-year-old man was savagely beaten for wearing a Star of David;

and in a suburb of Lyons, an attack on a Jewish woman by a mother and daughter—continue to make news. In January 2014, the day before Holocaust Memorial Day, 17,000 people marched in a demonstration in Paris shouting, “Jews, get out of France!” While many of these events have links to radical Muslim politics, and as much as existing bias has been magnified by the situation in Gaza, the palpable anti-Semitism in today’s France is not solely the product of current racial and political tensions, but is deeply rooted in receptive soil.¹

Fortunately, there’s a counterpoint. As we exit the Hugo museum, I’m surprised to discover the Synagogue des Vosges, right in the midst of this regal square. Then, it’s on to the Shoah Memorial museum. Pat consults his map, but it’s not easy to find on the crisscrossing web of streets and avenues in the Marais, once a thriving Jewish community.

At the corner of a busy intersection, a red sign with white letters, “Mémorial de la SHOAH” points to a tiny side street, Allée des Justes, where inscribed on a cornerstone plaque are the names of the French men and women who risked their lives to rescue Jews from annihilation.

In a state of silent attention, we continue down the street toward a modern, bunker-like gray stone building. The side facing us is blank and windowless, embellished only by a Star of David. On the street outside the museum, two armed guards stand, rifles at attention. We submit to a search as we enter a small vestibule, and from there are directed into the courtyard that leads to the Wall of Names.

As we enter the outer courtyard, Pat catches a glimpse of the Wall—many walls really, in parallel rows that form

1. When I began writing this essay, most people I spoke with were surprised that anti-Semitism was virulent in France. Since the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the slaughter of four people in a kosher supermarket, awareness is now widespread. Must it take a tragedy? Now, surely, Muslims have outstripped the Jews as the most despised, feared, and stereotyped minority.

narrow aisles between them. He inhales sharply and has to sit on a bench before we can continue. "So many names . . ." he says, dabbing at his eyes.

For Patrick, this is a new experience, whereas I am not a stranger to genocide close to home. My maternal grandfather traveled alone from Austria-Poland when he was 13 to join his older sister in New York, but the rest of his immediate family perished in the Holocaust. I remember, as a child, visiting distant relatives and being told in advance not to stare at the numbers tattooed on their arms. From this hushed warning, intimations of tragedy reached me before I had any awareness of history.

Now that Pat is connected to me—and also to Ginette and Dominique—he's hit by the full impact of Jewish history. Together we sit silently contemplating a cylindrical stone fountain inscribed with the names of the camps—a surprisingly soothing object, considering the subject.

We enter the inner courtyard to view the Wall: yard after yard after yard of smooth white marble, inscribed in blocks of continuous type recording thousands and thousands of individual names. A sign states that 76,000 Jews, including 11,000 children, were deported from France between 1942 and 1944 in collaboration with the Vichy government, to die in concentration camps. (In all of France, only 25,000 Jews survived deportation.) Also included are those who died in French internment camps and those shot as hostages or killed by Nazis, including French resistance fighters and rescuers, and those who disappeared, fates unknown. Silently we read:

This wall restores identity to the children, women and men the Nazis tried to eradicate from the surface of the earth. Their names are engraved in stone that their memory be perpetuated.

We've come with a mission—to find and photograph the names of Ginette's father and uncle, as well as Dominique's

eight male relatives, mostly uncles, who were deported during the war. My eyes swim as I try to orient myself. The names are arranged in blocks, alphabetically, by year. I locate the panels for 1943, and there, within the long list of family names beginning with K, I find the name of Ginette's father, Isaac, and nearby, her uncle. On one of the panels for 1944, Patrick locates the long list of Dominique's relatives who perished in the camps. We photograph their inscribed names, our own small act of remembrance.

Inside the museum, the main gallery features an exhibition on Jewish life in Paris and the history of the Jews in France. On rows of benches, people sit and watch a documentary on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe. Patrick watches, absorbed, and later joins me in viewing the exhibition: photographs of the Marais when it was a Jewish ghetto, pictures of Drancy and other camps, yellow armbands and stars, tattered striped uniforms, newspaper headlines, posters and propaganda about the Jewish conspiracy. "*LE JUIF: l'internationale du parasitisme*," the cover of a pamphlet proclaims, illustrated with gruesome caricatures of Jews with enormous noses and pointy teeth, or portrayed as malevolent rodents—images that inspired Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus*. On the lower level, we pause in front of a crypt containing ashes taken from the death camps and from the Warsaw Ghetto. Along the walls of the stairwell back to street level, projected images of survivors' families afford an uplifting transition.

Hand in hand, we walk to the Rue des Rosiers, the famous street in the Jewish quarter that's a little *shtetl* in itself, complete with Orthodox synagogue, Jewish bookstores, and restaurants, all with signs in Hebrew. A bakery window displays a dazzling array of macaroons, meringues, coffee cakes and other goodies; I pull Patrick inside and we buy a slice of poppy seed strudel and some *rugelach* for the road. (You can take the girl out of the *shtetl*, but you'll never destroy her love of traditional baked goods.) A restaurant

specializing in *Cuisine Yiddish d'Europe Centrale* evokes memories of elaborate meals lovingly prepared by my grandmother, and taped to the window is a flyer for a *klezmer* concert—evidence of my people's tenacious presence in the City of Light. But even here we find the footprint of anti-Semitism. Across the street is the site of the Jewish deli, *Chez Jo Goldenberg*, destroyed in 1982 when two terrorists opened fire on the dining room with machine guns and a grenade; six people were killed and 22 injured—at that time “the heaviest toll suffered by Jews in France since WWII.”² It's since reopened as a different restaurant, but the original signage remains as a landmark.

By this time we're hungry. We join the long line outside a falafel place and eat our drippy sandwiches standing in the street, watching the parade of people. In the midst of traffic, an impish man wearing a yarmulke and ritual fringes weaves among the cars, dancing and singing songs in Yiddish-accented French, stopping to *kibbitz* with pedestrians and drivers of slowly passing cars—a caricature straight out of *Fiddler on the Roof*, but with a manic edge. I smile, but feel uncomfortable; I hate the idea that he's reinforcing stereotypes for spare change. His performance evokes the same discomfort I often feel when I see the ultra-Orthodox in their Old World garb on the streets of New York City, so obviously different from the prevailing culture. Is my reaction any different from the bias with which people have regarded Jews throughout history? Or from the sentiment behind the French ban on Muslim women covering their faces? How can I, a middle class New Yorker, presume to know what it would take to survive as an alien, maligned entity in an adopted culture? Placed in the same position, would I opt to blend in—or maintain and assert my identity?

So far, Patrick and I haven't been able to figure out a way to live together. Both of us have jobs that require us

2. Andrea Rothman, “4 Dead in Shooting at Jewish School in France,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 19, 2012.

to stay on our home turf, but in the future that may change. Could I live in France? Aside from the obvious deterrents—work, language, independence, friends, my rent-stabilized apartment in Manhattan—I wonder how I'd feel living in a suburb of Paris where there are no other Jews, in an atmosphere of bias that is causing Jews to leave France in record numbers.

Whenever I travel in France, I'm conscious of how I'm being perceived, not simply as an American but as a Jew. Even though my religious identity is not readily apparent and not normally an issue, here it comes into sharp relief.

A couple of summers ago, Patrick's neighbors invited us over for dinner. Beforehand, Patrick seemed nervous. When I asked why, he said that the husband was anti-Semitic, with strong stereotypical views about Jews and their attitude toward money, *even though he has never personally known or conversed with a Jewish person*. His wife, on the other hand, was more enlightened. "I know they will love you," Patrick assured me.

When we arrived, the wife embraced me, but from the taut line of her husband's lips came only a curt *bonsoir*. By the time we finished our champagne, he'd warmed to me and has remained cordial ever since. No, more than cordial—genuinely fond of me. I accepted my role in his conversion as a personal form of *tikkun*—healing the world. Unfortunately, he is one of countless others like him—decent, moral people, some of whom may never have personally known a Jew, yet believe the stereotypes—in France and all over the world.

The last time we arrive after our long journey from Paris, Maman doesn't answer the door. We let ourselves in and find her sitting in an armchair, head thrown back, snoring lightly.

"*Qui êtes vous?*" she cries when Patrick gently awakens her. It takes several minutes for her to recognize us, and

Patrick is visibly shaken. But soon she takes her cane and slowly walks toward the kitchen, where the *charlotte* she's prepared for us is waiting.

The next day, Maman and I are sitting on the sofa when I admire the simple gold bracelet she's wearing. The chain, she points out, is woven in a braided *fleur-de-lis* pattern—“*très français, très délicat*”—a handcrafted artifact of traditional design, much like Maman herself.

“You like this bracelet?” she asks.

“*Oui*,” I say. “It looks very pretty on you.”

“Then it is yours.” I try to defer, but she places her hand on my arm.

“I bought this bracelet for you, but when you said you didn't like gold, I put it on and have worn it ever since. But now I would like you to have it.”

Maman tells Patrick to remove the chain from her wrist. As he fastens it around my own wrist, the gold still bearing her warmth, I am moved.

“*Merci, Maman*,” I say. “It is beautiful.”

I wear the bracelet until its delicate strands begin to fray. The fine chain can't withstand the punishment of daily wear; like the complex social fabric of contemporary France, it is strained to breaking and in urgent need of care. The bracelet, at least, can be repaired. After taking it to a jeweler who makes it look as good as new, I decide to wear it only for special occasions—most recently when I go to synagogue to say the prayer of remembrance for my French Maman.

—In memory of *Christiane Jeannes and Ginette Cummins*.