

Oh, Lord. Oh, Lourdes. Alors!

I grew up in Bangor, Maine, in an anthill Jewish community dominated by Catholics and Protestants. My best friend was Pollyanne Mead whose father was a policeman. From the walls of every room in her house hung technicolor photographs of Jesus, his halo casting a mournful otherworldly light over features more beautiful than any movie star at the Bijou Theater's Saturday matinee. Pollyanne's brother Frankie used to torment us as we played with our dolls under a Jesus portrait and next to one or another of the statues of the Virgin Mary that dotted the tables, even the dinette set. "Sissies," he'd taunt. Then turn to me. "Christ killer," he'd add.

"Don't mind him," Pollyanne would say, "he's got no manners." Did manners mask the truth? I wondered. Did Pollyanne agree with such slander but choose to remain tactful? I wanted to ask. But I kept my mouth shut.

If I'd killed Christ, it was something we never discussed at home. Though politics got analyzed and argued over at every meal, religion seemed to be as off base as sex. My mother's grandfather had been the first rabbi in Bangor; his son, my grandfather, was an atheist. My mother aspired to WASPdom, she worshipped Boston Brahmins the way Pollyanne's family worshipped Jesus; her favorite novel was The Late George Apley, her favorite family, the Adams, She was suspicious of anything that reeked of "nouveau." She liked old furniture and faded carpets and falling-apart cars. Our old falling-apart house was nothing like the spiffy subdivisions in the development called "Little Israel" where a lot of the Jewish community lived. How bad for your character were dishwashers

and thick wall-to-wall and power steering and showers, I considered, turning the separate spigots that alternately froze or scalded you.

My mother didn't belong to the Jewish organizations that the mothers of my Jewish friends had joined—Hadassah, the Sisterhood, the JCC. She was the proud integrator, Bangor's James Meredith or Charlene Hunter, of formerly restrictive groups, the only Jewish woman on the board of the Y, the Family Service Committee, the only Jewish member of the Athena Club. She was notorious—and proud of the fact—for arriving at bar mitzvah celebrations after the service and just when the reception would start. She poured cocktails at five o'clock and preferred watercress sandwiches with the crusts cut off to chopped liver on rye. We ate white bread. A bagel was never sliced on our kitchen countertop. Thus, it was hardly surprising that Hanukah did not brighten any of our cold dark December dusks. Unlike the other Jewish families who stressed the eight days of Hanukah as payback for Christmas, our mother knew there was no comparison. She gave us Christmas.

Of a sort. If we owned no menorah or even one of those white plastic ersatz pines advertised at W.T. Grant's as a "Hanukah bush", we also boasted—in some perverse, equal-opportunity holiday sense of fairness—no tree, no Christmas lights or decorations, no Bing Crosby White Christmas on the hi fi, no jolly Santa figures about to burst into "ho ho ho." But if we didn't have the Santa figures, we had Santa. We left peanut butter and jelly sandwiches out for him along with a brimming glass of milk placed near the draftiest window to keep it cold. On Christmas Eve, my mother stomped on the roof with her heaviest boots and scraped something—a shovel?—along the shingles to approximate the sound of a sleigh. And though I worried about how Santa

would visit my sister and me in a household without a fireplace, every Christmas morning brought presents tied with ribbons. The sandwiches had disappeared, a few crumbs dotting the plate. The glass empty, except for a ring of milk encircling the rim; in their place, an envelope, return address: the North Pole, which enclosed a proper thank-you note. According to our mother, no situation existed that didn't warrant a lesson in etiquette.

Though my father participated in this let's not disappoint the children activity to a certain degree, he led a secret life which both mystified and excluded me. Mornings, I saw him wrap strange things around his arm, attach a little leather box to his forehead, sling a striped and fringed shawl over his shoulders and rock back and forth. "What's he doing?" I'd ask my mother.

"Prayers," she'd dismiss.

My father had grown up in a kosher house. My father prayed. My father went to the synagogue. These were things better ignored—a secret family shame like drinking or adultery.

Meanwhile, my friends and cousins used to head to the synagogue for potato pancake parties, latke bake-offs. I heard the stories. How Norman Kaminsky scraped his skin right into the potatoes. How the blood from the boys' knuckles seasoned the pancakes. I made excuses for being left out of this raucous merriment, these peculiar rituals. Would I ever want to taste Norman Kaminsky's blood? Would I ever want to eat the skin from my classmates' knuckles? Besides, I heard all about the unfair division of labor; the boys won the honor of grating the potatoes; the girls had simply to fry them.

"Why can't we get a menorah?" I'd ask my mother.

“And leave those candles burning?” she’d cringe. She who set ablaze dozens of white tapers in their antique candlesticks on the sideboard and dining table for Saturday night dinner parties. “Besides,” she replied, “you have Hebrew school and Aunt Edie and Uncle Abe and Uncle Arthur.”

Yes, I went to Hebrew school. Why, I couldn’t understand. Perhaps it was a cheap means of babysitting while my mother attended board meetings and bridge games; and later, when my father got sick and hardly made it out of bed to his law office, a way to keep me out of the house. I had Hanukah at Hebrew school. I twirled a dreidel and ate some of those boy-grated, girl-fried potato pancakes, now cold and stale. That should have been more than enough, implied my mother. Especially, if you take into account Aunt Edie, Uncle Abe and Uncle Arthur, my father’s maiden sister and bachelor brothers who filled in all the many festival-wise holes for my sister and me and my first cousins. My uncles and aunt shared a house on Palm Street that was a refuge for us nieces and nephews when life become unsatisfactory under our own roofs. There were seven of us, the oldest child in each family—Marilyn, Marshall, Mameve, Mark—all named for my father’s mother, the sainted Mamie who died before we were born and whose sons—six of them—so adored her, as legend goes, that they would carry her on their backs when she was too old and weak to walk. Her photographs were no less enshrined in the rooms of her six sons and one daughter than Pollyanne Mead’s various Jesuses and Madonnas. And no less worshipped either, I was sure.

With the exception of Passover-- which Uncle Sam and Aunt Lil (Marilyn’s parents) held as they possessed the biggest table--Abe, Arthur, and Edith’s kitchen was control central for all Jewish high and low holiday celebrations (We, of course, by

unanimous vote, hosted ecumenical, New England Thanksgiving). On Palm Street we could light the menorah. We could collect eight days of gold-wrapped chocolate Hanukah gelt. And the real thing, too--crisp dollar bills, that might, depending on report cards and Hebrew School attendance and dreidel skill, increase exponentially so that on the eighth day there'd be quite the tidy sum to buy the tap shoes or the American Flyer we were coveting. Uncle Arthur had 78's of Jewish music, which only years later did I come to identify as Klezmer. Every bowl and platter offered up potato pancakes and chicken soup and chopped liver and these sticky honey balls, the peasantry, ethnic food my mother would recoil from, food the Adams family and the Late George Apley, and the ladies of the Athena Club and the likes of Pollyanne Mead would have trouble even pretending to taste no matter the requirements of etiquette. Nothing felt so delicious and forbidden.

But then I lived a bifurcated life. Who was I? Was I my mother? Was I my father? Did I celebrate Hanukah or Christmas? Did I prefer Santa and Jesus and Mary or the bible stories of Moses and Rachel and Sarah that we were reading in Hebrew school?

My confusion was not helped by my attendance at mass for almost one solid year. On his way to work, my father would drop me off early at the Abraham Lincoln School where my first grade teacher, Miss O'Connor, would drag me along to seven o'clock mass. It never occurred to me to tell my parents about these visits; such starts to my day seemed as ordinary as breakfast or brushing my teeth. At St. John's Church, I liked the Jesuses and the Madonnas better than the scarier ones in Pollyanne Mead's house. I liked the cushioned benches, the hushed voices, the kneeling pews, the clink of the rosary chains, the comforting murmur of prayers, less strange and startling than my father's

silent bowing and the funny-looking things lashed around his arms and forehead. Was the blood of Jesus, the wine in the fancy goblet, more acceptable than the blood and scraped flesh of some boy's knuckles in the potato pancakes? At least, it appeared more dignified, somehow.

My first-grade Catholic year ended abruptly when, walking past St. John's with my father, I crossed myself.

Other things ended, too. My father stopped his prayers; he stopped ordering only halibut at restaurants although we never kept kosher at home. He stopped going to the synagogue. He didn't walk with me, and when he did, he staggered. "Your father's a drunk," said Frankie Meade, the same kid who once told me I killed Christ. But my father never drank. It was my mother who made those cocktails in the silver shaker, who poured cheap Don Popov vodka into antique decanters of crazed and bubbled glass, who opened bottles of maraschino cherries and olives stuffed with pimentos.

The summer after that year, my father went away to Boston, to what the grown-ups called in hushed voices "the sanatorium." When he came back, things changed. He rarely went to the office. He lay in bed or on the sofa. At night he moaned. Doctors made house calls. He yelled. He demanded. He criticized us. In the middle of most family dinners, though my mother was determined to carry on, candles lit, yards of silverware on either side of service plates, we left the table in tears. Your father was so brilliant, people said, talking about him in the third person, past tense. He went to Harvard Law school from Bangor; he wrote those books on Maine law, they marveled. I began to see him, in Catholic terms, as the cross we had to bear. There was no God or Jesus or Moses, no Santa or Rabbi, no prayers in Hebrew or in Latin that could make him well.

It took him ten years to die. A disease of the central nervous system. A virus, they thought. Maybe something to do with polio, they said.

I joined the Jewish sorority and also the fancy high school social club that inducted few Jews. So insecure about my own social position, I never thought to refuse when they didn't invite any of my Jewish classmates. I had friends in Little Israel and friends in the big Victorian mansions on Broadway. My best friend was the daughter of the minister at All Souls' Congregational Church. After delicate inquiries about dietary restrictions, her family invited me for parsimonious dinners of tuna stuffed into tomatoes (one tomato apiece) and a small scoop of vanilla ice cream for dessert. I ate lavishly at My Aunt Edie's, Uncle Abe's and Uncle Arthur's. I lit Hanukah candles on their menorah and continued to accept the gold-wrapped chocolate coins well after the age for such childish treats had passed. All through college and into my twenties and thirties, envelopes would come at Hanukah time—a little Hanukah gelt, they'd say. Love from Abe, Arthur and Edith. And out tumbled a much welcomed check for eighteen dollars, the number that, in Hebrew letters, signifies long life.

While the freshly-bar mitzvahed or newly-graduated received trips to Israel, I wanted nothing more than to go to Paris. I was in love with all things French. Mostly, I was in love with my French teacher, an Albanian named Efthim Economu, a teacher of such extraordinary humor and charisma and enthusiasm he seemed lit from within. On your first trip to Paris, he used to tell us, you'll turn a corner on the Champs Elysees, and there I'll be.

Certain I'd found my own Late George Apley as well as the focus for my private prayers, I memorized the Marseillaise. Lips pursed, I perfected the French u.

My freshman year of college, I traveled to Paris with my grandmother; the following summer, with my husband to be. At every corner I searched in vain for Monsieur Economu.

I married. My husband, who had grown up in a rigid Jewish house, celebrating Hanukah and every holiday joylessly, was relieved to leave difficult family associations behind.

Once we had our own children, everything changed again. We bought a menorah—a wild-looking, rough-hewn concoction on display at one of the Radcliffe pottery sales. We lit orange candles, which melted down the sides of the mottled clay and were nearly impossible to scrape off. We sought out dreidels in all sizes and colors. We gave the children eight days' worth of gold-covered coins. We chose Christmas presents, but nixed any kind of tree. We celebrated Thanksgiving, Passover, Hanukah, Kwanza, the high holidays; we bought them chocolate Easter eggs. They voted against Hebrew school and bar mitzvahs, and we agreed, since their only regret seemed to be the gifts they'd miss. Both boys, in turn, visited Paris and Jerusalem.

Years later, when my first book came out, I went back to Bangor for a reading. There in the front row sat Monsieur Economu. Was he eighty? Even older? I couldn't tell. He looked exactly the same to me. He laughed. His eyes twinkled. Charm poured off him with the pervasive intensity of his European-smelling cologne. He kissed me on both cheeks.

"I've been to Paris many times," I confessed, "and on each trip, I looked for you around every corner." I paused. "But you weren't there," I accused.

"Oh, yes I was," he said. "Alors! You just weren't looking hard enough."

That Christmas, I received a present from my editor, a young Irish-American whose parents still spoke with a brogue, a man much amused by my tales of my first-grade Catholic year. He had sent me a clear plastic Madonna filled with “genuine water from Lourdes.” For months I had been complaining that my manuscript-in-progress required divine intervention, needed a cure. I velcroed the Madonna to my computer. Two days later, an envelope arrived in the mail, postmarked Bangor. I opened it. Inside was a card. A menorah graced the cover. Silver Hebrew letters embossed the top. Stars of David marched up the sides. Eight orange candles flamed. Happy Hanukah, the card read. Signed underneath were these words: I hope you have a great holiday. Shalom. With love from your French teacher, Efthim Economu.

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