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Jennifer Lang

Contest Winner - 1st Place

An American-French-Israeli hybrid, Jennifer Lang writes mostly about her divided self, Israel, and home. Her stories have appeared in *1966*, *Ascent*, *The New Haven Review*, *The Tishman Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Full Grown People*, and *Under the Gum Tree*, among others. They have also been featured on *Brevity's* One-Minute Memoir and NPR's Hanukkah Lights podcasts. A Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays nominee, she earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and serves as Assistant Editor for *Brevity*. Founder of israelwriterstudio.com and tweeter @JenLangWrites. If not in her home office, tinkering with words, she is probably on a yoga mat, trying to understand Triangle Pose.

[Uprooted](#)

Uprooted

Whisper

I awaken to the smell of butter frying. I reach for Philippe, but the bed's empty. "Hello?" I call, opening his bedroom door.

"*Tci.*" I follow his voice down the hall and peer into the kitchen. "*Joyeux anniversaire!*"

We met in the hills of Jerusalem in May; I moved to his place in Haifa in July; it's late August, my twenty-fourth birthday. Home—my parents' house, where I was born and raised, in the San Francisco Bay Area—is lump-in-my-throat far, especially today.

In a fitted T-shirt and floral boxers, my French boyfriend holds the handle of the frying pan with one hand and pours batter with the other. When batter hits butter, it hisses. The thin floury mixture spreads to the edges. A crepe forms, full and round. He pulls me close, embracing me, his mouth melting into mine.

"Wait. Look."

He removes the pan and flips the crepe, midair, *sans* spatula.

"Bravo!" I say.

Heat—the weather, our stove, my desire—fills the galley kitchen. I've never seen him make crepes. I don't know how to make crepes. No six-pack-abled man has ever made me crepes before.

"Hungry?"

“Famished.”

He serves me crepes with sugar, strawberry jam, butter. I eat. He flips. He eats.

Gazing at Philippe, I think about how his mouth barely opens when he talks; how his eyes are as dark as the 3 a.m. sky; how he speaks his language, my language, plus German and Hebrew; how he looks like he does 100 push-ups every day; how he’s a full head taller than I am; how he’s so slim I can wrap my arms around him; how he makes jokes with a straight face. I like almost the entire package save for the torrid heat and stifling humidity of his newly adopted homeland: Israel. But what I dislike altogether is how, six months back, he stopped driving, using electricity, and spending money every *Shabbat* from Friday to Saturday sundown. I arrived in the country to learn the language and see my Israeli family, between a job in Paris and graduate school in New York, with no intention of staying. And I grew up as a Reform Jew on the west coast, where protesting in front of the Soviet Embassy to free the Russian Jews trumped going to temple and praying.

In that crepe-flipping moment, I hear one side of my brain whisper to the other: *stay, forever, hold onto him*. I do my best to ignore the other side, reminding me about the 7,387 miles between California and Israel, our religious incompatibility, and the current political climate called Intifada or Palestinian uprising. Angst, big and small, rational and irrational, insinuates itself: would I make it back for a family emergency; would I resent observing the Sabbath like Philippe; would our daily life be defined by civil war? All things combined, it’s not a perfect fit, but I tuck those second thoughts deep, recalling my father’s wise words before I left to live abroad: “Try not to think so hard. Try to roll with the flow.”

Naïve

Eight months after our first kiss, Philippe and I get engaged. We hire an old family friend to officiate our Jerusalem wedding. A middle-aged man with a clean-cut college boy look, the American-born Orthodox rabbi sports khaki Dockers, a polo t-shirt and loafers, exuding northern California cool. One Friday, the three of us sit in a café to discuss details.

“How religious do you want the ceremony?” Rabbi Laderman asks, understanding our differing levels of observance. “Because unlike what most people think, there isn’t just one way to do it.”

I catch Philippe’s eye. “So instead of me circling you seven times, what if we each circle around one another half?” A Jewish custom whereby a bride is thought to enter seven spheres of her husband’s innermost being. “And, what if I put the ring on your finger, too?” Another tradition reserved for the man.

Philippe agrees. I ask if my female American cousin can hold one of the four *chuppah* poles, an honor traditionally reserved for men. Nobody objects.

“But you have to go to the *mikve*,” the rabbi says.

I know but resent a bunch of bureaucratic, god-fearing strangers requiring me to immerse in the ritual bath, naked, for some woman to inspect and bless me in order for our union to be recognized by the State of Israel.

After our meeting, I relax, confident the hard part is behind us. But I’m so, so naïve. We live in the Middle East. I should know better.

Yet

A month before our wedding, as August heat engulfs us, tension in the region rises when Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait. President Bush responds, building up troops and resources in the Persian Gulf. U.N. Security Council

Resolution 660 condemns the invasion and demands Iraq immediately, unconditionally withdraw all forces. Two weeks later, U.N. Security Council Resolution 661 imposes international sanctions on Iraq. Hussein's response: he'll withdraw if Israel withdraws from all occupied Arab territory and Syria from Lebanon. Impasse: a situation I will later start to recognize in our marriage.

Everybody from our immigrant friends to our Israeli colleagues—not to mention politicians, army, media—say war is inevitable. I can't handle *it*.

It is greater than the recent bomb on a Tel Aviv beach, the stabbings on some city streets, a suicide bus bomber, invasion, operation, occupation, and other heavy-sounding, power-wielding –ion suffixes. *It* is the sum of each and every devastation and death in this part of the planet that visits me at night, disturbing my dreams.

But perhaps what worries me most is us. What if Philippe says it's okay if I don't agree with all the *Shabbat* and holiday rules and restrictions as long as I follow them, *his* way? Will I lose my sense of self? I love this man and he loves me, but is my gut trying to tell me something I don't want to acknowledge?

I can't discern the core issue. Is it our differences in Jewish observance? My fear of Israel? Simple premarital nerves? Or some nasty combination of all these?

Yet, when we're together I feel light and quiet inside. Our similarities outweigh our differences. Where we are and what we believe become irrelevant.

Jitters

Despite political unrest in this region, one hundred of our closest family and friends surround us at sunset. Under the burning-orange-colored canopy, I circle Philippe then Philippe circles me. He lowers my veil, a custom of Jewish males since Jacob wed a veiled Leah in error. Rabbi Laderman asks, in English and Hebrew, if we promise to love, cherish, and protect each other, whether in good fortune or in adversity, and to seek with each other a life hallowed by the faith of Israel. Neither one of us hesitates.

After the ring, after the wine glass, after the prayers, we kiss. A long, deep, succulent kiss.

The next day, we fly to France, part-honeymoon, part-celebration with those who couldn't come.

After stowing our carry-ons overhead and fastening our seatbelts, we sit, holding hands.

"Does this feel unreal to you or is it just me?" I ask.

"Me too." He pauses. "Do you feel like we made things complicated?"

Is he suffering from post-marital jitters, or is this his deadpan humor?

"I'm from France, you're from America, we live in Israel, my parents are in one country, yours in another, and we're in a third."

I lean my head against my husband's shoulder. My body fits seamlessly against his whether sitting, standing, or supine. Our new reality sounds daunting; to see our folks, we have to spend a lot of money, use vacation time, and traverse several time zones.

"So how about every seven years we move?"

In Judaism, seven's super symbolic: the number of *aliyot* (calling a member of a congregation to the pulpit to read from the Torah) on *Shabbat*, the number of times a Torah is carried around the synagogue on Simchat Torah (a holiday marking the end of the annual cycle of public Torah readings and the beginning of a new one), and the number of

times the phrase “when a man takes a wife” appears in the bible (seriously underestimated compared to how many times my husband has already taken me).

Philippe laughs: “If you want.”

“We’ll spend seven years in Israel, seven in France, and seven in America. Deal?”

He squeezes my hand, and we rest against one another as the plane ascends into the September sky. I’m too young, too un-lived to know how physically stressful, logistically difficult, and emotionally detrimental constant moves can be in marriage and how the older I get, the more profound my need to feel rooted will become.

Once airborne, I gaze out the window. Below: Tel Aviv and its indiscriminate skyscrapers, Jaffa and its iconic lighthouse, palm-tree lined streets and army jeeps. As we climb in altitude, everything blurs until I’m floating, untethered.

Bind

After we have a baby and I finish my Master’s thesis at Haifa University and start working, Philippe gets antsy. He wants an MBA—abroad. I feel like he’s handed me the Get-Out-of-Jail card in Monopoly. When he’s accepted into a one-year program in Paris, I negotiate an extension to spend a second year in California. Motherhood makes me detach from the move-every-seven-years sentiment, hankering for my parents. Amidst packing preparations, we discuss how long to freeze our account with a banker.

“*Shnatayim*,” Philippe says, meaning two years.

“*Lo, camah shanim*,” I interrupt to indicate several years.

Why does the Hebrew language with fewer than half as many words as English have a special one for 24 months?

I secretly count on the possibility of exceeding our two-year agreement. I don’t want nouns or numbers to bind us.

Philippe glares at me. The banker waits.

“Fine, *shnatayim*.”

I yield to ease the tension and finish our business. But I don’t mean it.

As soon as we exit and step into the blaring sun, Philippe pounces. “Why’d you say *camah shanim* when we already discussed two years?”

I vividly remember that we’d left our timeframe conversation unresolved.

“Because who knows what can happen? Jobs, kids? Too many unknowns.

We should leave it open-ended.”

We stop deliberating to avoid making a scene. We stop deliberating to avoid escalating into an argument. Married only three years, we’re pros at hiding difficult topics in inconspicuous places.

Elephant

The server wheels a dim sum cart alongside our table. I whiff all the forbidden food—*treyf*—steamed chicken baos, barbeque pork buns, and greasy pot stickers. In Israel, we always ate in kosher restaurants. Now, back in the Bay Area, Philippe and I order vegetarian in non-kosher ones. But with my mother, I eat the way I was raised: a liberal Jew

with complete disregard for dietary restrictions. Likewise, with her on *Shabbat*, I revert to shopping, watching movies, and making pancakes.

“So what are your plans?” she asks, her mouth brimming with shrimp dumplings, my favorite. “For next year? For the future?”

I shrug. I tell her a lot, not everything. She has no inkling that whenever I broach the weighty where-to-live conversation with Philippe, he rebuffs with “Not now” or “I’m not ready.” It’s become taboo.

After five years in Israel, one year in France, and now three here, Philippe and I are adrift. No—at odds.

Home, for us, is not an easy construct, cleaving us together like Crazy Glue. For me, it’s here, where I speak the language, understand the mentality, feel safe, and yearn to raise children. For him, it’s there, where our ancestors wandered for thousands of years, where our people struggle to exist.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m glad I left and lived abroad because it makes me appreciate being back. But just because I’m happy doesn’t mean Philippe is.”

“Is there anything Dad and I can do to help? We love having you nearby.”

“We just need time.”

And we need to make the elephant retreat. We need a therapist trained in cross-cultural rifts because neither one of us possesses the skills to charge the beast. In every room of our rental house, it looms: an invisible, imperious presence.

Territory is at stake. If I want to plant roots in my hometown and Philippe wants to plant them in his chosen land, then how will we ever both feel comfortable and complete?

Betrayed

Philippe sits stone-like beside me. I wrap my arms around myself and rock back and forth on the couch. “Look at me,” I say. “I can’t believe I’m in marriage counseling, pregnant, for the third time. How could I be so stupid? How could *we* be so stupid?”

Our kids are five and two. I stroke my expanding belly, furious for being in this position: another baby en route but no firm base or bedrock.

Dr. Plaze hands me a box of tissues. I wipe my nose, trying to take a deep breath. The intensity of my anger shocks me. I’m raw, working long hours as a content writer for several start-ups, unable to turn off my anxious mind in bed. Is it us, Philippe and me, or those cursed first-trimester hormones?

“You need to start the conversation at the beginning,” Dr. Plaze says. “You need to let the other one in when you’re thinking about something big, like when you decided to wear a *kippah* every day,” he says to Philippe. “Talk about it before you do it.”

Only one session in, and I already like this man. He’s Israeli, married to a Californian, and he gets our cross-cultural, transcontinental, interdenominational dilemmas.

“Okay, when we left Israel in ’94, we agreed to return after two years,” Philippe says. “But now, we’ve been here for four, and Jennifer’s changed her mind. She’s betrayed me.”

His shoulders fold in like an old man. My bursting belly draws back, punched. Dr. Plaze nods.

Betrayal sounds harsh. Maybe I've misled Philippe about moving back, but we aren't treacherous or unfaithful to one another. Our foundation is deep and intractable; it works for and against us. Lately against.

"I have the right to change my mind, don't I? Things change. People change. Circumstances change."

Israel has changed. Since leaving not long after the Intifada ended, 16 country-wide suicide bombings have claimed 163 lives.

I consider changing my mind to be my prerogative, nothing more. But am I being honest with myself, my spouse? Before leaving Philippe's dreamland, hadn't I hoped for this outcome—to get here and stay?

If I can change my mind, then he can change his. Yet, as soon as he did—covering his head every day, not just in synagogue or solely on *Shabbat*—I fumed, picked fights. A *kippah*-wearing man isn't common in northern California. It makes him and our differences—between us, with others—stand out, separating us from each other and from everyone else.

I stare at Philippe. My confession swirling in my mind, trapped. He avoids my gaze.

"Do you love Israel *more* than me?"

"No, but I don't like living here."

I purse my lips, lock my jaw. How nonchalantly we combine the adverbs *here* and *there*. Really, we're neither. More betwixt and between. Perhaps we're lost?

"I can't be Jewish the way I want here," he says, meaning he can't comfortably cover his head or keep kosher outside the house since there are so few options. "You agreed to two years abroad. Remember?"

Tears slide down my face. The therapist jots notes. I wonder what adjectives he uses to describe us, our situation: cold, complicated, imbroglio?

If California is home for me but Israel is home for Philippe, then where will we both feel whole?

We leave in silence.

"Where to?"

Philippe shrugs. The baby somersaults. I gulp.

Nest

After putting the kids to bed, we flop onto the living room carpet and face the ceiling. Philippe reaches for my hand.

"My boss called. We have to relocate, New York or Israel, or I'll lose my job." After years of working virtually for an Israeli start-up, it merged with a Manhattan-based one, now requiring face-time. "Everyone's predicting the local dot-com bubble's going to bust, and I don't want to be unemployed."

"New York," I say. "As long as we buy a house."

I need to nest where I can manage mail, pay bills, and navigate healthcare in my native tongue, where I can avoid the topic of suicide bombs altogether.

In 2000, New York is relatively safe compared to Israel. News headlines dwell on Israeli politician Ariel Sharon's declaration that the Temple Mount complex in Jerusalem's Old City, site of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque,

the holiest site in the world to Jews and the third holiest in Islam, will remain under perpetual Israeli control. The Second Intifada starts: every terrorist's dream.

"Raising kids is hard enough. I'm overwhelmed when one needs homework help, another's misbehaving, and another's crying. I can't be a good parent unless I feel secure. I don't in Israel. Do you get it?"

No response.

Reality hits. Meaning registers. "I can't imagine leaving my parents, living far away, again." I sob. "But I'm willing to move—to New York—so you can keep your job. But only if we buy a house. I'm sick of feeling uprooted, never knowing how long we're staying."

Our never-ending negotiations and mobile marriage continue. When Philippe had the jitters after our wedding a decade ago, he predicted it like a prophet. But I don't share his biblical sensibilities. I can't even relate to Ruth's well-known words: *Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live.*

No matter where we reside, one of us will always fantasize about or rue the loss of the place we left behind.

Boundlessness

In White Plains, I start working after the kids start their new schools. One stunning September morning, Philippe calls.

"Go upstairs to your office, now. Turn on the TV, quick. The buildings crashed."

In the narrow room under the eaves of a steep roof sit two desks and a Sony set on industrial carpet.

"What buildings?"

"The two tall buildings. You know, downtown. They were hit."

Sometimes I forget he's foreign. He doesn't know common names in English.

I race up the steep steps and turn on the news. Ghastly images flood the screen: the World Trade Center twin towers in flames, planes crashing, smoke billowing, people jumping. I lower the volume to mute their screams.

"Oh my god. Where are you?"

"On our office rooftop. I see smoke. I smell burning. *C'est horrible.*"

The distance between our house in Westchester and the devastation in Manhattan seems surreal. I don't know anyone who works there, though over time, I'll hear more and more stories of loss from neighbors and new friends. In Israel, a country roughly the size of New Jersey, everyone from a second cousin once removed to the local shopkeeper has lost someone to a war or an act of terror. It's inevitable. This feels the same yet so different.

As that cloudless morning of September 11, 2001 unfolds, the noun *terrorism* infiltrates our American vocabularies.

"See," Philippe says, "even New York isn't safe."

~

That night, the moon glows outside our bedroom window. The branches of a huge chestnut tree brush against the siding, making faint scraping sounds against the glass. Philippe and I cling to one another under the lightweight blanket. We don't discuss today, the still unnamed tragedy. We can't discuss tomorrow, a pit of unknowns.

He reaches for me in the darkness. His lips graze mine. I flip off my bedside light then remove my pajamas. We always sleep naked.

“Tu sens tellement bon.” He nuzzles his nose against my neck.

When he speaks French in bed, Pavlov takes over. My skin tingles. Heat rises from some mysterious well. My mind and body separate. But not tonight. I’m heavy, burdened, distracted. Unable to erase grisly scenes from my mind. Unable to imagine getting up and starting over tomorrow. Unable to focus on Philippe.

“J’ai envie de toi.”

I’m full of opposition: my head’s saying one thing, my body another. A running theme in our relationship. He strokes my inner thighs.

Is it wrong to make love? It feels wrong. So much is wrong.

Philippe murmurs more beautiful foreign words. About me, his desire, my scent. I give up, give in. I cannot resist.

Later, wrapped in his arms, I sob. An alarming, strange sound—deep and low and intense—pours out of me. Is this what it means to keen: to wail in lamentation for the dead?

“Shhh,” Philippe kisses me. His lips gentle and tender. Always.

“Those poor people... who’ll never be able to experience this again.”

This: love, lovemaking, joy, climax, connection, boundlessness.

In our moon-lit room, we put aside our power struggles over *here* and *there*, thankful to be together and alive. It’ll take another decade and intense therapy before we agree to swap one adverb for the other, permanently returning to Israel, and another six before I make peace with the place.

But tonight, here, now, Philippe and I clutch one another and breathe.

“ In 2016, toward the end of my MFA, I rifled through three large Container Store tubs for my old journals, letters, and photo albums to revisit my younger self, to remember what first brought me to Israel in 1989, to recall why I stayed. Thanks to my advisor’s nudge, I began writing scenes about my multicultural marriage, focusing on our inability to both feel comfortable and find home in the same country. A memoir-in-micro-chapters, ‘Uprooted’ is an excerpt from my manuscript. ”

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