



# The Coachella Review

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## Sealed

BY JENNIFER LANG

As soon as I hear the haunting up-and-down lilt of the siren, I know what it means: run.

“Girls, come down, *now*,” I summon my teenage daughters from their bedrooms one flight above ours. My voice reverberates off the tile floors and thinly insulated walls, typical of most Israeli homes. It’s 9:52 p.m. on a red-hot July evening, the beginning of summer vacation, 2014. The alarm stuns me: we live in a supposed safe haven, ten miles from Tel Aviv, inland, in a small city called Raanana.

One after the other, my husband Philippe, Daniella, Simone, and I enter the room of many names—storage, shelter, safe room, sealed room—in the basement. Our son lives in an apartment less than five miles away, and I’m certain he’s hearing the same alert. I’m also certain he’s been preparing for this attack since he serves in an Intelligence unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and knows more about the country’s security situation than we do.

We leave the hulking metal door slightly ajar so the air can circulate, and we can hear when the sound stops. We stand a few feet apart, our bodies erect and separate, none of us leaning against the walls or cabinets. Even though we’re together in a small, enclosed space, I am overwhelmed by a torrent of loneliness.

I was twenty-five, newly married, and living in the coastal city of Haifa when I heard my first air raid alert: 3:00 a.m., January 18, 1991. Deep in slumber, with Philippe’s brawny body spooned around mine, I nudged him awake. The eerie, unmistakable sound—higher then lower then higher then lower—echoed out into the frigid air. A new immigrant from America, was I resilient enough to live through war in Israel?

Philippe and I grabbed our bathrobes and scuttled down the hallway to our guest-room-turned-sealed-room. With the apartment's only cordless phone in hand, we closed the door behind us and taped the doorframe, sealing ourselves into our eight-by-eight foot room.

For the past six months, we had been on high alert mode ever since Iraq invaded Kuwait, causing tension between them, the U.S., and Israel to escalate. Everybody from my brother in Jerusalem to our friends in Haifa to my Israeli colleagues at work—not to mention politicians and the army and the media—had agreed war was inevitable. Each time the conversation had led to that conclusion, Philippe played devil's advocate or joker extraordinaire, trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation, making comments like: "Don't worry. Hussein can't aim. Even if he sends missiles, they'll probably land in Syria or Saudi Arabia."

Still, we'd taken the IDF's preparations seriously. We'd chosen the room with the smallest window, which we covered with industrial strength plastic sheeting and duct tape around its sill to make it airtight against chemical warfare; a phone jack; a television plug; and a comfortable place to sit and wait and wonder what was happening outside.

Now, inside our basement shelter, I glance at my daughters. If we have to be stuck in a confined space, at least it's the coolest room in the house.

“You okay?” I ask. We only relocated to Israel three summers earlier. Our son, a recent high school graduate, had arrived separately to enter the army.

Both girls nod yes. Seventeen-year-old Daniella looks downward, her thick hair shielding her eyes, as she checks her phone for news even though there’s no cell reception. Fifteen-year-old Simone’s glasses sit on the bridge of her nose; her big, hazel eyes grow wider, as if she’s amused or confused.

The girls’ coolheaded exterior amazes me. In their Israeli school, they run through practice drills and review emergency safety procedures when teachers and students head directly into the allocated shelters where they await further instructions. They’ve learned how to log onto the Ministry of Education’s website to study online in case of school closures during times of war. In history classes, they’ve studied all seven of Israel’s past wars. In current events, they discuss the importance and the implications of staying vigilant about suspicious objects.

Despite my daughters’ nonchalant facade, maternal guilt nibbles at every cell in my central nervous system. After our first five years in Israel in the early 1990s, when our son was born, Philippe and I left for a defined two-year period: the first for him to obtain an MBA in France and the second for me to live closer to my parents in northern California. One year in America turned into two then three then more. The girls were born. Year after year, I refused to return, to raise my children on the other side of the world, in what oftentimes seemed like the most unstable region of the globe. A decade later, when our eldest announced his intention to enlist in the IDF before college, the Israel issue

resurfaced. Philippe insisted. I ceded as a way to keep our family together. We never consulted the girls.

Now, here, while listening to my first siren in decades, I must confront myself: was I a fool to have agreed to come back?

I know that no place is immune to danger. The world—my vision in which the U.S. is safe and Israel isn't—changed on September 11, 2001. That night, when Philippe returned home from his office in Manhattan, we held each other close, shaken, stricken, sad. "See," he said, "terrorism's everywhere. Not just in Israel."

Trapped in the sealed room, I glare at Philippe. If my eyes could speak, they'd say, *This is your fault; we're here because of you;* or *How could you put our lives in danger like this?* I can't decide if I blame him as much as or more than I blame myself.

After sealing ourselves into our guest room, on the first night of the Gulf War, Philippe and I unwrapped the world's worst presents. A gift from the Israeli government, the gas masks were distributed to every citizen shortly after our wedding.

Since we met in Israel, it had made sense to marry here too. We picked September 9, 1990 for its catchy combination of numbers. Philippe promised he'd never forget our anniversary with all those nines. And, since the ninth was a few days after Labor Day in the United States, my family could attend more easily. But Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, causing my parents' best friends to cancel and injecting a painful dose of our geo-political reality into our bloodstreams.

The gas masks—big, black, and burdensome—petrified me, but we had to wear them in case any incoming missiles carried poisonous substances. I lifted the mass of heavy rubber, strapped it tightly across the back of my head, and leered at Philippe through two giant, heavy-duty plastic holes. He looked both alien and familiar, perhaps like an actor playing a soldier in a film about World War Two Europe. Following instructions, we removed a protective guard to breathe through the large grey canister in front of the nose. That first inhale was challenging, like deep sea diving without oxygen. With the masks secured, Philippe and I sat to watch the news.

Occasionally, the national station flashed images of CNN filming live from Baghdad, the closest I ever came to a horror show, beholding Iraqi SCUDs hurtling through the sky toward us, into Israel.

“How long do we have to stay in here?” Simone asks.

I don’t know and shrug my shoulders. She acts indifferent. I fall somewhere on the scale between calm and numb.

“Not long. Just wait until the siren stops and then we can leave,” Philippe says.

He knows a lot, but not everything. The girls believe him, but I don’t. How would he know if there is a second or subsequent missile being launched? How could he know if or where or when the Iron Dome, a web of missile launchers designed to protect the country from incoming rockets, might have intercepted it or if the

missile landed intact? After almost twenty-four years of marriage, his poker face no longer fools me. I detect the contained smirk, the mischievous look behind his eyes, confident that his sureness comforts us, especially me.

I lean against the wall, mute. Words stick to my teeth like a mouth full of peanut butter. Since when are Hamas' missiles, which are being launched from Gaza, powerful enough to reach us sixty miles north in Raanana? I cannot ask because with our most recent move back to Israel, I made a conscious decision to disconnect. I used to read every page of the English edition of the *Jerusalem Post* as well as the weekly edition of the *Jerusalem Report* magazine. Today, the menace of Iran's nuclear capacity and Syria's civil war and Lebanon's sporadic rockets into northern Israel forces me to disengage—so I can sleep, so I can dream, so I can forget where I am. But if I choose to stay uninformed, then I don't know the facts, and therefore I question my right to challenge the missiles careening north toward us in the center of the country.

Philippe and I sat close on our sagging blue sofa, our legs and arms touching. The gas mask's acrid smell of raw rubber made me gag. My body shivered uncontrollably. The phone rang.

“Hi, it's us. We're watching the news. Are you two okay?” my mother asked from across 7,000 miles of land and sea.

“We're fine,” I said, full of fake bravado.

A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, I'd never experienced a human or natural disaster other than minor earthquakes. Those second-long tremors couldn't compare to a country-wide siren, awakening six million people in the black of night, signaling an incoming missile that might carry lethal chemicals, destination unknown.

My great aunt and uncle, who had lived through every one of Israel's past wars, often told me stories about how no one ever left home without a portable radio tuned to the news and how being in public bomb shelters as a community always comforted them. This conflict, however, would be different; between the desire to watch live coverage on television and the chemical threat, requiring us to close ourselves off in sealed rooms, we'd become isolated in our homes. I felt torn, wondering which option reassured me most: the two of us sitting alone on the top floor of an apartment building that could be hit, or the two of us standing in some dank room, below ground, with our veteran Israeli neighbors, whose favorite expression was "yihiyeh beseder"—*it'll be okay*—when I didn't think anything would be okay.

I would rather be washing dishes at my kitchen sink than be caged in our basement shelter with my family. Reinforced with concrete on all sides, this rectangular space resembles a jail cell with its mammoth metal door and window-less walls. As Philippe, the girls and I wait for some signal—a boom or perhaps a second alert—I eyeball the detritus of our lives.

Since the day our furniture and worldly goods arrived three years prior, Philippe has been transforming this room into his man-

cave, confident we'd never need a useable, inhabitable refuge. He stores everything from his electric drill to his treasured wine collection. Hundreds of bottles, predominantly red, hailing from Israeli wineries such as Ella Valley Vineyards, Yarden, and Domaine du Castel, fill shelves, overflowing onto the floor. Add to that towers of transparent Container Store bins stacked one on top of the other filled with our most recent U.S. tax returns and childhood photo albums. A hulking particle-board IKEA unit holds our outdated winter coats, hats, scarves, mittens, gloves and thermal underwear, remnants from our ten winters on the Eastern seaboard. Somewhere in the room are our gas masks, still in their boxes, still unopened.

While the four of us remain motionless and engulfed in our own thoughts, I smile, overcome by an odd sense of gratitude: for the lack of chemical threat so that we don't need to break in the gas masks we received shortly after entering the country a few years ago; for a safe place in our home, unlike some apartment dwellers who have to seek shelter down many flights of stairs in their basements, or, if they cannot make it in time or are aged or infirm, in the stairwells.

I am grateful that in Raanana, we have ninety seconds to reach safety. In the cities and settlements, kibbutzim and moshavim close to Gaza, they have only fifteen. For those who live adjacent to the Gazan border, mortars—not missiles—represent the greatest danger, and, because they're fired more frequently and cannot be detected or intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome, sirens don't even sound. Our minute and a half seems luxurious, and I think about everything I can accomplish in that time: brush my teeth, sip a cup of water, butter a piece of bread, tie my shoes, button a shirt.

After hanging up the phone with my parents, I gazed at Philippe. He clasped my hand and stroked my fingers, a rhythmic, soothing motion. I wondered if crying in a gas mask could make me hyperventilate.

After the alarm stops, Philippe and the girls and I wait.

“Zeho. Ya’alla,” he says with certainty.

In our house, we speak a linguistic stew, mixing French and English and Hebrew, utilizing whichever word of whichever language most aptly fits. Zeho is Hebrew for that’s it and ya’alla is slang, derived from Arabic, meaning let’s go; they’re both catchier than in our native tongues.

“How do you know it’s safe?” I ask. How long had we been in the sealed room? Three, five, fifteen minutes?

A faint boom makes the walls of our house shudder. We all hear it. Philippe doesn’t flinch, but the girls and I do.

“That’s how,” he says.

Meaning a missile was heading our way, the siren warned us, the Iron Dome perhaps intercepted it, fragments or missiles in their entirety thudded to the ground, causing the windows and walls to tremble, and the danger has passed—for now.

While listening to the faint voice of Peter Arnett report on CNN, I leaned my head on Philippe's arm. I admired how even-keeled and self-possessed he was compared to me.

"Ça va?" he asked. Was I okay?

Nothing about the situation, myself included, was okay, but at least I was breathing and my body had stopped quivering.

I exhaled, heavy and loud. He squeezed my hand.

Far off in the distance, we heard a loud thwack. Something had fallen somewhere.

We sat side by side, in silence.

An hour, maybe two later, another alarm rang: a series of short, even wails. The alert over, we removed our masks, un-taped the door, and returned to our bedroom. I wasn't sure if or how I'd be able to sleep, sensing that this was only the beginning.

I drooped into bed and thought of the wedding vows Philippe and I had taken three and a half months earlier, surrounded by family and friends at sunset, in a beautiful restaurant overlooking Jerusalem valleys. The rabbi asked us if we promised 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. At the time, adversity and faith of Israel were just words.

"Well, that was fun!" Daniella says as we trudge upstairs.

Her fingers move frantically across her phone screen as she checks for news updates.

“Mm hmmm,” I say lightheartedly, a tad snarky.

As soon as we step into the kitchen, she downloads the Red Alert app, which dings every time Hamas lobbs a missile into Israel.

“Do you have to?” I ask.

My daughter ignores me. A rising high school senior, Daniella’s been called up to serve in an unknown capacity in the IDF one year from this summer, and, in addition to her brother, her older friends and some of her cousins are already in uniform.

“Want to watch *Friday Night Lights*?” Philippe asks me, code for *let’s crawl into bed and cuddle*.

“Absolutely,” I say. “Girls, you okay?”

They nod and giggle. They love teasing us about our Netflix-binging behavior. Once, we watched four episodes back-to-back and analyzed each one the next day.

“Yeah, yeah, just go to bed even though it’s still early. Watch your show. We’re good,” Simone says.

Together, we climb the stairs and pause outside our bedroom.

“Bonne nuit,” Philippe pecks them on their foreheads, his signature kiss, and I hug them, perhaps a moment longer than usual, thankful they still let me.

“Lila tov,” they respond in Hebrew while walking upstairs to the top floor. Usually they’re talkative, animated, swapping stories about their day. Tonight, they’re more subdued. We all are.

“Ça va?” Philippe asks if I’m okay once we’re in bed.

I sigh thinking about something I’d told him back in New York. On more than one occasion, I’d said: “I’m leaving, with the girls, if there’s war.”

I sigh, understanding the situation differently now: I can’t leave. I cannot abandon my son, his friends, his peers, or the sons and daughters of our friends, neighbors, cousins, and colleagues. I cannot abandon this country and its *Am Yisrael Chai*; the people of Israel are alive. Emotion runs so deep during crises like these, making me feel as if we’re one family. All the soldiers who have been called up and are in uniform are all *our* children.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I say. Do I sound convincing?

“Ready?” he asks. We turn forward to stare at our laptop screen.

Focusing on Coach Taylor and his team’s small-town Texan drama enables us to avoid our own Middle Eastern one. Our evening ritual allows Philippe and me to tiptoe around or altogether avoid the elephant in the room: our America versus Israel debate. We are ill-equipped and unable to confront and charge the beast that brought us back to this place. A place where adversity and faith—of commitment, of relationship, of country—are constantly challenged, striving to share space and live side by side.

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