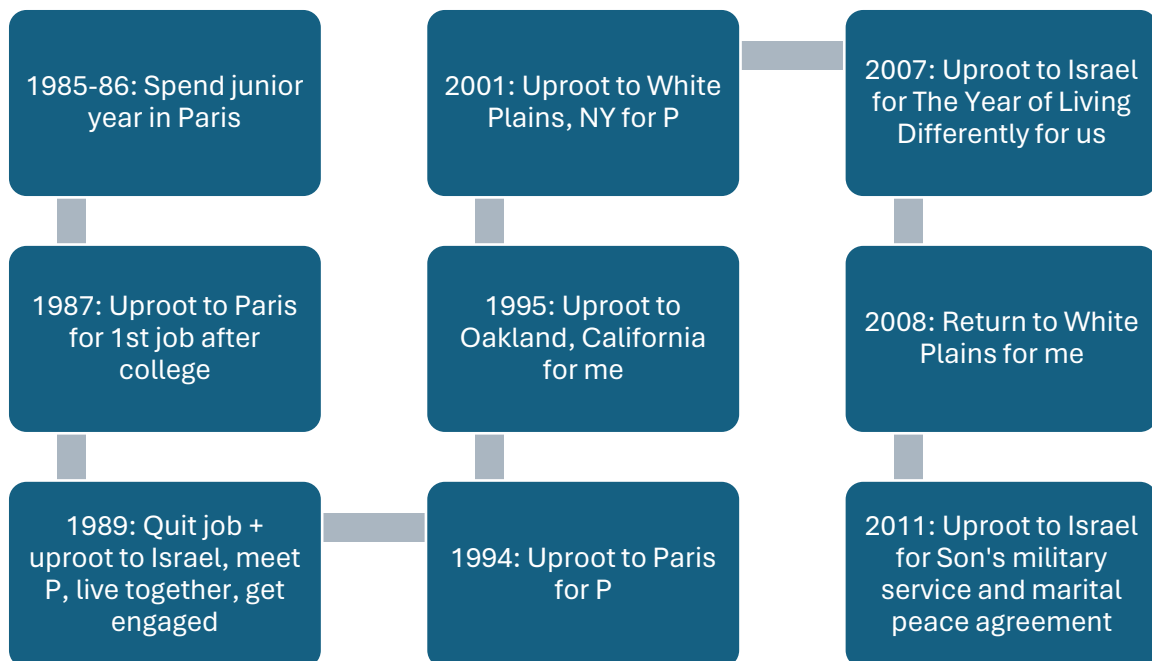


For my first 18 years

I sleep in the same room (opposite my parents) in the same house (116 Monticello Avenue) in the same city (Piedmont) in the same state (CA) in the same country (USA), but soon after leaving for college in Evanston, IL, I pine for elsewhere and end up peripatetic...



Conjunctions

After making love in his mismatched sheets, Philippe and I tally how many times we've each been to Israel. I count my trips—1971, 1975, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1988, now in 1989—needing both hands.

He counts his on one hand: |||. *You win*, he says, as if we're competing.

I scan his room—no posters, no mirror, no nightstand—so boyish and beautiful, especially his bed.

Tell me everything, he says, adorning me with butterfly light kisses.

My tendency to share too much too soon makes me hesitate. He already knows that I'm here despite the First Intifada or Palestinian uprising, between a job in France and graduate school in New York, to immerse in Hebrew as well as to spend time with my only sibling and extended family, and that I miss my open-minded, California-born parents in the San Francisco Bay Area, but he has no idea that I made a Jackson Pollock mess of my love life the past two years and promised my mother that I wouldn't fall in love and stay.

No, wait, I want to know why you're here, I say, running my fingers through his silky chestnut hair. *What made you immigrate?*

Israeli chutzpah, Haifa, the Mediterranean, beach, bodysurfing, falafel, spicy food. Plus, my brother plans to make aliya too.

We each have one sibling; mine immigrated to Jerusalem, my temporary home base, immediately after college a few years earlier.

And since aliya comes from the verb la'a lot, which means to go up, I went up in my Jewish observance. Tu comprends?

Do I understand that he changed his lifestyle for a country? ~~Absolutely not.~~

All weekend, I study this man, admiring how his pointy nose dominates an angular face, his olive skin glistens with oily patches, and his feet have white lines underneath his sandal straps.

All weekend, he reaches for me, amorous and solicitous of my attention.

Ever since we met at a *Shabbat* retreat for Francophones 144 hours earlier, I haven't stopped thinking about him, convinced my secular mother will tell me it was *besher*—Yiddish for destiny—after enrolling me in a pilot French program when I was six.

Philippe fits every box on my imaginary list:

French	✓
Jewish	✓
Smart	✓
Single	✓
Sexy with a guarded smile	✓

A far cry from the men of late: one Catholic Parisian whom Sib refused to acknowledge, one Russian married man who my parents refused to discuss, one once-upon-a-time college friend who refused to commit.

Burrowed in Philippe's biceps, I try to block out the conjunctions: *if* he wasn't Sabbath observant, *and* he wasn't enrapt with his new homeland, *but* he is.

Between seams

The following weekend, I show Philippe my favorite Jerusalem haunts
in the Old City.
Hands clasped,
we enter through Jaffa Gate and
zig-
zag
through the Arab souk
in the Muslim Quarter,
down the alleys
toward the Cardo, the city's main street 1500 years ago,
in the Jewish one.
The scent of sesame pretzels mixed with fried falafel mixed with cat piss taunts me.
At
the top of the stairs, ~~before the security checkpoint facing the Temple Mount~~, above the
Wailing Wall,
we stop.

How many times have I stood in this spot?

Yet, every time feels different, hypnotic, like
stepping into the pages of a 10th-grade World History textbook.

A powerful force, a physical and emotional sense of belonging, makes me sigh.

Gazing at the ancient limestone wall, the gold Dome of the
Rock, a Muslim minaret, and the olive trees
beyond,

I pause.

At the bottom of the stairs, we part ways to enter the men's and women's
sections, where countless white slips of paper—notes and prayers, wishes and
dreams—nestle in its cracks, between its seams.

My wish list is simple:

no more violence,
no more war,
no more Israel Defense Forces.*

NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE! NO YOU-KNOW-WHO DAMN MORE! ENOUGH!

Minutes later, I spot Philippe walking away from the Wall backwards and beam.

*Add to wish list: more of this man

Room

Can you wait outside? Philippe asks on Friday morning.

Sure. (What the hell is his problem?) I open and close his bedroom door. (Listen or walk away?) I head to the kitchen for a cup of Nescafé. (Do I want to date someone with secrets?)

He finds me on the living room sofa. Before I can ask what or why, he says *when I was 13, my father taught me how to put on tefillin for my bar mitzvah.* I know they're the set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah that men put on their forehead and finger but have never seen anyone wrap them. *I've been doing it every day since then.*

Okay, I say. (Am I okay?) (Just how Jewish is this man?) (Do I want to be with someone so Jewish?)

I wasn't sure what you'd think. Because of Sib. You know?

Only together three weekends, he already knows a lot about me and my hang-ups.

In the small residential city of Piedmont, with less than 0.5% Jews, my parents picked and chose when to be Jewish. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, my father forced us to go to temple. On Passover, we dumped Ding Dongs and Ho Hos in the basement freezer, stacked Manischewitz macaroons and gefilte fish in kitchen cupboards, and brought PB&J sandwiches on matzo to school. On Friday nights, I went to school dances; on Saturdays, we yanked weeds in our backyard before U.C. Berkeley football games. But my identity was strong, cemented by five summers at Camp Swig and leadership positions in National Federation of Temple Youth. Since immigrating to Israel, Sib veered from our family, chose a different path, based on Torah and laws, landing on the far right side of the spectrum. ~~Think Kosher Kool-Aid.~~

Where does Philippe's traditional upbringing with kosher kitchen, synagogue on *Shabbat* and meals at home (Friday night dinner and Saturday lunch) then bike riding and mischief making with friends, plus public school, Hebrew school, and Jewish summer camp, fall?

Lying prone on his scratchy sofa, I motion for him to come closer, longing to feel his body brush against mine. Where he falls is still unclear, but I'm falling for, falling fast, falling deeply.

