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Here I Am

Written by Jonathan Safran Foer

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HERE

I AM

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER



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The president's speech in the chapter 'Nothing Is Not Political' was adapted from a speech President Obama gave in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti. The poems quoted from in Part VII are Franz Wright's 'Year One' and 'Progress'. Radiolab, Invisibilia, 99% Invisible and Dan Carlin's Hardcore History offered the inspiration for the podcasts Jacob listens to.

MW: *Facing you.*

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For Eric Chinski,
who sees through me,
and for Nicole Aragi,
who sees me through

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I

BEFORE THE WAR

GET BACK TO HAPPINESS

When the destruction of Israel commenced, Isaac Bloch was weighing whether to kill himself or move to the Jewish Home. He had lived in an apartment with books touching the ceilings, and rugs thick enough to hide dice; then in a room and a half with dirt floors; on forest floors, under unconcerned stars; under the floorboards of a Christian who, half a world and three-quarters of a century away, would have a tree planted to commemorate his righteousness; in a hole for so many days his knees would never wholly unbend; among Gypsies and partisans and half-decent Poles; in transit, refugee, and displaced persons camps; on a boat with a bottle with a boat that an insomniac agnostic had miraculously constructed inside it; on the other side of an ocean he would never wholly cross; above half a dozen grocery stores he killed himself fixing up and selling for small profits; beside a woman who rechecked the locks until she broke them, and died of old age at forty-two without a syllable of praise in her throat but the cells of her murdered mother still dividing in her brain; and finally, for the last quarter century, in a snow-globe-quiet Silver Spring split-level: ten pounds of Roman Vishniac bleaching on the coffee table; *Enemies, A Love Story* demagnetizing in the world's last functional VCR; egg salad becoming bird flu in a refrigerator mummified with photographs of gorgeous, genius, tumorless great-grandchildren.

German horticulturalists had pruned Isaac's family tree all the way back to the Galician soil. But with luck and intuition and no help from above, he had transplanted its roots into the sidewalks of Washington, D.C., and lived to see it regrow limbs. And unless America turned on the

Jews—*until*, his son, Irv, would correct—the tree would continue to branch and sprout. Of course, Isaac would be back in a hole by then. He would never unbend his knees, but at his unknown age, with unknown indignities however near, it was time to unball his Jewish fists and concede the beginning of the end. The difference between conceding and accepting is depression.

Even putting aside the destruction of Israel, the timing was unfortunate: it was only weeks before his eldest great-grandson's bar mitzvah, which Isaac had been marking as his life's finish line ever since he crossed the previous finish line of his youngest great-grandson's birth. But one can't control when an old Jew's soul will vacate his body and his body will vacate the coveted one-bedroom for the next body on the waiting list. One can't rush or defer manhood, either. Then again, the purchase of a dozen nonrefundable airplane tickets, the booking of a block of the Washington Hilton, and the payment of twenty-three thousand dollars in deposits for a bar mitzvah that has been on the calendar since the last Winter Olympics are no guarantee that it's going to happen.

A group of boys lumbered down the halls of Adas Israel, laughing, punching, blood rushing from developing brains to developing genitals and back again in the zero-sum game of puberty.

"Seriously, though," one said, the second *s* getting caught on his palate expander, "the only good thing about blowjobs are the wet handjobs you get with them."

"Amen to that."

"Otherwise you're just boning a glass of water with teeth."

"Which is pointless," said a redheaded boy who still got chills from so much as thinking about the epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

"Nihilistic."

If God existed and judged, He would have forgiven these boys everything, knowing that they were compelled by forces outside of themselves inside of themselves, and that they, too, were made in His image.

Silence as they slowed to watch Margot Wasserman lapping water. It was said that her parents parked two cars outside their three-car garage because they had five cars. It was said that her Pomeranian still had its balls, and they were honeydews.

"God*damn it*, I want to be that drinking fountain," a boy with the Hebrew name Peretz-Yizchak said.

"I want to be the missing part of those crotchless undies."

"I want to fill my dick with mercury."

A pause.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You know," Marty Cohen-Rosenbaum, né Chaim ben Kalman, said, "like . . . make my dick a thermometer."

"By feeding it sushi?"

"Or just injecting it. Or whatever. Dude, you know what I mean."

Four shakes, and their heads achieved an unintended synchronicity, like Ping-Pong spectators.

In a whisper: *"To put it in her butt."*

The others were lucky to have twenty-first-century moms who knew that temperatures were taken digitally in the ear. And Chaim was lucky that the boys' attention was diverted before they had time to slap him with a nickname he would never shed.

Sam was sitting on the bench outside Rabbi Singer's office, head lowered, eyes on the upturned hands in his lap like a monk waiting to burn. The boys stopped, turning their self-hatred toward him.

"We heard what you wrote," one said, thrusting a finger into Sam's chest. "You crossed a line."

"Some fucked-up shit, bro."

It was odd, because Sam's profligate sweat production usually didn't kick in until the threat had subsided.

"I didn't write it, and I'm not your"—air quotes—"*bro*."

He could have said that, but he didn't. He also could have explained why nothing was as it seemed. But he didn't. Instead, he just took it, as he always did in life on the crap side of the screen.

On the other side of the rabbi's door, on the other side of the rabbi's desk, sat Sam's parents, Jacob and Julia. They didn't want to be there. No one wanted to be there. The rabbi needed to embroider some thoughtful-sounding words about someone named Ralph Kremberg before they put him in the ground at two o'clock. Jacob would have preferred to be working on the bible for *Ever-Dying People*, or ransacking the house for his missing phone, or at least tapping the Internet's lever for some dopamine hits. And today was supposed to be Julia's day off—this was the opposite of off.

"Shouldn't Sam be in here?" Jacob asked.

"I think it's best if we have an adult conversation," Rabbi Singer said.

"Sam's an adult."

"Sam is *not* an adult," Julia said.

"Because he's three verses shy of mastering the blessings after the blessings after his haftorah?"

Ignoring Jacob, Julia put her hand on the rabbi's desk and said, "It's clearly unacceptable to talk back to a teacher, and we want to find a way to make this right."

"But at the same time," Jacob said, "isn't suspension a bit draconian for what, in the scheme of things, is not really *that* big a deal?"

"Jacob . . ."

"What?"

In an effort to communicate with her husband but not the rabbi, Julia pressed two fingers to her brow and gently shook her head while flaring her nostrils. She looked more like a third-base coach than a wife, mother, and member of the community attempting to keep the ocean from her son's sand castle.

"Adas Israel is a progressive shul," the rabbi said, eliciting an eye-roll from Jacob as reflexive as gagging. "We have a long and proud history of seeing beyond the cultural norms of any given moment, and finding the divine light, the Ohr Ein Sof, in every person. Using racial epithets here is a very big deal, indeed."

"What?" Julia asked, finding her posture.

"That can't be right," Jacob said.

The rabbi sighed a rabbi's sigh and slid a piece of paper across his desk to Julia.

"He *said* these?" Julia asked.

"He wrote them."

"Wrote *what*?" Jacob asked.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Julia quietly read the list: "Filthy Arab, chink, cunt, jap, faggot, spic, kike, n-word—"

"He wrote 'n-word'?" Jacob asked. "Or the *actual* n-word?"

"The word itself," the rabbi said.

Though his son's plight should have taken mental precedence, Jacob became distracted by the fact that this was the only word that could not bear vocalization.

"There must be a misunderstanding," Julia said, finally handing the paper to Jacob. "Sam nurses animals back to—"

"*Cincinnati Bow Tie?* That's not a racial epithet. It's a sex act. I think. Maybe."

"They're not all epithets," the rabbi said.

"You know, I'm pretty sure 'Filthy Arab' is a sex act, too."

"I would have to take your word for it."

"My point is, maybe we're completely misinterpreting this list."

Ignoring her husband again, Julia said, "What has Sam said about this?"

The rabbi picked at his beard, searching for words as a macaque searches for lice.

"He denied it. Vociferously. But the words weren't there before class, and he is the only person who sits at that desk."

"He didn't do it," Jacob said.

"It's his handwriting," Julia said.

"All thirteen-year-old boys write the same."

The rabbi said, "He wasn't able to offer another explanation for how it got there."

"It's not his job to," Jacob said. "And by the way, if Sam *were* to have written those words, why on earth would he have left them on the desk? The brazenness proves his innocence. Like in *Basic Instinct*."

"But she did it in *Basic Instinct*," Julia said.

"She did?"

"The ice pick."

"I guess that's right. But that's a movie. Obviously some genuinely racist kid, with a grudge against Sam, planted it."

Julia spoke directly to the rabbi: "We'll make sure Sam understands why what he wrote is so hurtful."

"Julia," Jacob said.

"Would an apology to the teacher be sufficient to get the bar mitzvah back on its tracks?"

"It's what I was going to suggest. But I'm afraid word of his words has spread around our community. So—"

Jacob expelled a puff of frustration—a gesture he'd either taught to Sam or learned from him. "And hurtful to *whom*, by the way? There's a world of difference between breaking someone's nose and shadow boxing."

The rabbi studied Jacob. He asked, "Has Sam been having any difficulties at home?"

"He's been overwhelmed by homework," Julia began.

"He *did not* do this."

"And he's been training for his bar mitzvah, which is, at least in theory, another hour every night. And cello, and soccer. And his younger brother Max is going through some existential stuff, which has been challenging for everyone. And the youngest, Benjy—"

"It sounds like he's got a lot on his plate," the rabbi said. "And I certainly sympathize with that. We ask a lot of our children. More than was ever asked of us. But I'm afraid racism has no place here."

"Of course it doesn't," Julia said.

"Hold on. Now you're calling Sam a *racist*?"

"I did not say that, Mr. Bloch."

"You *did*. You *just did*. Julia—"

"I don't remember his exact words."

"I said, 'Racism has no place here.'"

"Racism is what racists express."

"Have you ever lied, Mr. Bloch?" Jacob reflexively searched his jacket pocket yet again for his phone. "I assume that, like everyone who has ever lived, you have told a lie. But that doesn't make you a liar."

"You're calling me a liar?" Jacob asked, his fingers wrapped around nothing.

"You're boxing at shadows, Mr. Bloch."

Jacob turned to Julia. "Yes, the n-word is clearly bad. Bad, bad, very bad. But it was one word among many."

"You think the larger context of misogyny, homophobia, and perversion makes it *better*?"

"But he *didn't do it*."

The rabbi shifted in his chair. "If I can speak frankly for a moment." He paused, thumbing the inside of his nostril with plausible deniability. "It can't be easy for Sam—being Irving Bloch's grandson."

Julia leaned back and thought about sand castles, and the Shinto shrine gate that washed up in Oregon two years after the tsunami.

Jacob turned to the rabbi. "Excuse me?"

"For a child's role model—"

"This should be good."

The rabbi addressed Julia. "You must know what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"We do *not* know what you mean."

"Perhaps if it didn't seem, to Sam, that saying anything, no matter—"

"You've read volume two of Robert Caro's biography of Lyndon Johnson?"

"I have not."

"Well, if you were the worldly kind of rabbi, and *had* read that classic of the genre, you'd know that pages 432 to 435 are devoted to how Irving Bloch did more than anyone else in Washington, or *anywhere*, to ensure the passage of the Voting Rights Act. A kid could not *find* a better role model."

"A kid shouldn't have to look," Julia said, facing forward.

"Now . . . did my father blog something regrettable? Yes. He did. It was regrettable. He regrets it. An all-you-can-eat buffet of regret. But for you to suggest that his righteousness is anything but an inspiration to his grandchildren—"

"With all due respect, Mr. Bloch—"

Jacob turned to Julia: "Let's get out of here."

"Let's actually get what Sam needs."

"Sam doesn't need anything from this place. It was a mistake to force him to have a bar mitzvah."

"What? Jacob, we didn't force him. We might have *nudged* him, but—"

"We nudged him to get circumcised. With the bar mitzvah, it was proper force."

"For the last two years, your grandfather has been saying that the only reason he hangs on is to make it to Sam's bar mitzvah."

"All the more reason not to have it."

"And we wanted Sam to know that he's Jewish."

"Was there any chance of him not knowing that?"

"To *be* Jewish."

"Jewish, yes. But *religious*?"

Jacob never knew how to answer the question "Are you religious?" He'd never not belonged to a synagogue, never not made some gesture toward kashruth, never not assumed—not even in his moments of greatest frustration with Israel, or his father, or American Jewry, or God's absence—that he would raise his children with some degree of Jewish literacy and practice. But double negatives never sustained a religion. Or as Sam's brother Max would put it in his bar mitzvah speech three years later,

"You only get to keep what you refuse to let go of." And as much as Jacob wanted the continuity (of history, culture, thought, and values), as much as he wanted to believe that there was a deeper meaning available not only to him but to his children and their children—light shone between his fingers.

When they had started dating, Jacob and Julia often spoke about a "religion for two." It would have felt embarrassing if it hadn't felt ennobling. Their Shabbat: every Friday night, Jacob would read a letter he had written for Julia over the course of the week, and she would recite a poem from memory; and without overhead lighting, the phone unplugged, the watches stowed under the cushion of the red corduroy armchair, they would slowly eat the dinner they'd slowly prepared together; and they would draw a bath and make love while the waterline rose. Wednesday sunrise strolls: the route became unwittingly ritualized, traced and retraced week after week, until the sidewalk bore an impression of their path—imperceptible, but there. Every Rosh Hashanah, in lieu of going to services, they performed the ritual of tashlich: casting breadcrumbs, meant to symbolize the past year's regrets, into the Potomac. Some sank, some were carried to other shores by the current, some regrets were taken by gulls to feed their still-blind young. Every morning, before rising from the bed, Jacob kissed Julia between the legs—not sexually (the ritual demanded that the kiss never lead to anything), but religiously. They started to collect, when traveling, things whose insides had an aspect of being larger than their outsides: the ocean contained in a seashell, a depleted typewriter ribbon, the world in a mercury-glass mirror. Everything seemed to move toward ritual—Jacob picking Julia up from work on Thursdays, the morning coffee in shared silence, Julia replacing Jacob's bookmarks with small notes—until, like a universe that has expanded to its limit and then contracts toward its beginning, everything was undone.

Some Friday nights were just too late, and some Wednesday mornings were just too early. After a difficult conversation there would be no kiss between the legs, and if one isn't feeling generous, how many things really qualify as being larger on the inside than on the outside? (You can't put resentment on a shelf.) They held on to what they could, and tried not to acknowledge how secular they had become. But every now and then, usually in a moment of defensiveness that, despite the pleas of every better angel, simply could not resist taking the form of blame, one of them would say, "I miss our Shabbats."

Sam's birth felt like another chance, as did Max's and Benjy's. A religion for three, for four, for five. They ritualistically marked the children's heights on the doorframe on the first day of every year—secular and Jewish—always first thing in the morning, before gravity did its work of compression. They threw resolutions into the fire every December 31, took Argus on a family walk every Tuesday after dinner, and read report cards aloud on the way to Vace for otherwise forbidden aranciatas and limonatas. Tuck-in happened in a certain order, according to certain elaborate protocols, and on anyone's birthday everyone slept in the same bed. They often observed Shabbat—as much in the sense of self-consciously witnessing religion as fulfilling it—with a Whole Foods challah, Kedem grape juice, and the tapered wax of endangered bees in the silver candleholders of extinct ancestors. After the blessings, and before eating, Jacob and Julia would go to each of the children, hold his head, and whisper into his ear something of which they were proud that week. The extreme intimacy of the fingers in the hair, the love that wasn't secret but had to be whispered, sent tremors through the filaments of the dimmed bulbs.

After dinner, they performed a ritual whose origin no one could remember and whose meaning no one questioned: they closed their eyes and walked around their house. It was fine to speak, to be silly, to laugh, but their blindness always became silent. Over time, they developed a tolerance for the dark quiet and could last for ten minutes, then twenty. They would meet back at the kitchen table, and then open their eyes together. Each time it was revelatory. Two revelations: the foreignness of a home the children had lived in their entire lives, and the foreignness of sight.

One Shabbat, as they drove to visit their great-grandfather Isaac, Jacob said, "A person gets drunk at a party, and hits and kills a kid on the way home. Another person gets equally drunk, and makes it home safely. Why does the first one go to jail for the rest of his life, while the second gets to wake up the next morning as if nothing happened?"

"Because he killed a kid."

"But in terms of what they did wrong, they are equally guilty."

"But the second one didn't kill a kid."

"Not because he was innocent, but because he was lucky."

"But still, the first one killed a kid."

"But when we think about guilt, shouldn't we think about actions and intentions, in addition to outcomes?"

"What kind of party was it?"

"What?"

"Yeah, and what was the kid doing out that late, anyway?"

"I think the point—"

"His parents should have kept him safe. *They* should be sent to jail. But I guess then the kid wouldn't have parents. Unless he lived in jail with them."

"You're forgetting he's dead."

"Oh, right."

Sam and Max became enthralled by intention. Once, Max ran into the kitchen crying, holding his stomach. "I punched him," Sam said from the living room, "but not on purpose." Or when, in retaliation, Max stomped on Sam's half-finished Lego chalet and said, "It wasn't on purpose; I only meant to stomp on the rug beneath it." Broccoli was fed to Argus under the table, "by accident." Quizzes weren't studied for, "on purpose." The first time Max told Jacob "Shut up"—in response to a poorly timed suggestion that he take a break from some Tetris derivative on which he was about to crack the top ten scores of the day but wasn't supposed to be playing in the first place—he put down Jacob's phone, ran to him, hugged him, and with fear-glazed eyes, said, "I didn't mean it."

When the fingers of Sam's left hand were crushed in the hinge of the heavy iron door and he screamed, "Why did that happen?" over and over and over, "Why did that happen?" and Julia, holding him against her, blood blooming across her shirt as breast milk used to when she heard a baby cry, said simply, "I love you, and I'm here," and Jacob said, "We need to go to the emergency room," Sam, who feared doctors more than anything any doctor could ever treat, pleaded, "We don't! We don't! It was on purpose! I did this on purpose!"

Time passed, the world exerted itself, and Jacob and Julia began to forget to do things on purpose. They didn't refuse to let go, and like the resolutions, and Tuesday walks, and birthday calls to the cousins in Israel, and three overflowing shopping bags of Jewish deli food brought to Great-Grandpa Isaac on the first Sunday of every month, and skipping school for the Nats' home opener, and singing "Singin' in the Rain" while riding Ed the Hyena through the automated car wash, and the "gratitude journals," and "ear inspections," and annual pumpkin picking and carving and seed roasting and monthlong decomposition, the whispered pride fell away.

The inside of life became far smaller than the outside, creating a cavity, an emptiness. Which is why the bar mitzvah felt so important: it was the final thread of the frayed tether. To snip it, as Sam had so badly wanted, and as Jacob was now suggesting against his own real need, would send not just Sam but the family floating off into that emptiness—more than enough oxygen to last a life, but what kind of life?

Julia turned to the rabbi: "If Sam apologizes—"

"For *what*?" Jacob asked.

"If he apologizes—"

"To *whom*?"

"Everyone," the rabbi said.

"Everyone? Everyone living and dead?"

Jacob assembled that phrase—*everyone living and dead*—not in the light of all that was about to happen, but in the pitch-blackness of the moment: this was before the folded prayers bloomed from the Wailing Wall, before the Japanese Crisis, before the ten thousand missing children and the March of a Million, before "Adia" became the most searched term in the history of the Internet. Before the devastating aftershocks, before the alignment of nine armies and the distribution of iodine pills, before America never sent F-16s, before the Messiah was too distracted or nonexistent to awake the living or the dead. Sam was becoming a man. Isaac was weighing whether to kill himself or move from a home to a Home.

"We want to put this behind us," Julia said to the rabbi. "We want to make it right, and go through with the bar mitzvah as planned."

"By apologizing for everything to everyone?"

"We want to get back to happiness."

Jacob and Julia silently registered the hope and sadness and strangeness of what she'd said, as the word dissipated through the room and settled atop the stacks of religious books and on the stained carpeting. They'd lost their way, and lost their compass, but not their belief that it was possible to get back—even if neither knew exactly what happiness she was referring to.

The rabbi interwove his fingers, just like a rabbi, and said, "There's a Hasidic proverb: 'While we pursue happiness, we flee from contentment.'"

Jacob rose, folded the paper, tucked it in his pocket, and said, "You've got the wrong guy."