



PRAYER FOR THE FRENCH REPUBLIC
By Joshua Harmon
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1. PATRICK

PATRICK

These are my great-grandparents. Their names are Irma and Adolphe. It's their piano Marcelle inherited. Which is fine. I'm not bitter.

The story goes, the SS sent someone to arrest them, but their building's super grabbed him and said, "What are you doing, it's old people, leave them alone." And he did. He left, and Irma and Adolphe spent the war in their apartment in Paris, untouched.

They have three grown children. Jacqueline got out with her family before the war and fled to Cuba. But Robert was arrested in '42, Lucien in '43, along with his wife and three children. There's no mail service, no telegrams, no phone calls. For the last year, Irma and Adolphe haven't heard a word about their children. They know nothing.

And I know almost nothing about them. I didn't ask questions as a kid. I know just a handful of details: They were first cousins-- people married their cousins in those days. I know Adolphe was nearly blind, and Irma had won first prize at a piano conservatory when she was young. I know they'd tried to make it in America, but couldn't scrounge up any work, so they'd come back to France and took over the family business.

But these are just facts. What were they like, as people? Papa had just one anecdote: When he was little, Irma would butter his bread, then scrape her knife against his piece of bread to get butter for hers. She'd survived World War I, the Great Depression. She'd learned to economize.

And this stayed with me for a long time. To think-- all anyone remembers when you're gone is this tiny gesture, this trick you taught yourself, when you were one small person facing the giant forces of history. War, Depression, and this woman who'd been a prize winning pianist figures out how to make butter last longer.

2. DANIEL, CHARLES, MARCELLE

DANIEL

I guess it was a few years ago now, there was one winter, it didn't snow. It just did not snow. And people kept talking about climate change and global warming, so it was on my mind, but also, I love winter. And to be in Paris when it snows... it doesn't get old, at least, not to me. But this one winter, no snow. December, January, February. Nothing. Finally, it's the first week of March, I'm walking to the subway... I feel flurries. It was too warm for anything to stick, but still-- flurries. And I felt... grateful: to be alive, to have grown up at a time when I really got to experience winter. I wanted to say thank you, but who do you thank for the snow? So I went to synagogue, and I prayed, and, I liked it, so I kept going. And I'm-- I'm still figuring out how I feel about, you know, God but, I believe in the Earth. That feels close enough.

CHARLES

It's not about a baseball cap, Marcelle. The issue is not how Daniel dresses, don't you see? He could cover up, he could never leave the house again, it wouldn't change the fact that this is how people feel. We know it. We know it because when given the chance, they express it. Our son's been attacked twice now. He can't walk down the street without people staring at him, glaring at him, menacingly--

MARCELLE

Well I can't listen to more of your, I walked down the street, I heard a prayer, I want to leave. I can't listen to that, ok? Our lives are here. They're here. We live here. You have a practice, I run a department. We have a home. Our children live here. All our friends. My father-- and his needs are only growing, and we all know my brother is never going to step up and take responsibility for the overseeing of his care, which means, I need to be here. So let's say you decided, in a burst of romanticism, that you had to live by the sea, and we should move to Normandy, or Biarritz, or Antibes-- we couldn't do it. We're too young to retire and we're too old to start over, even in our own country. We have too many obligations. So it's not just impractical, it's impossible, and frankly--

3. ELODIE (2)

ELODIE – 1

I mean, look at the Jews of Spain -- look at Ladino -- you know what Ladino is?

Before Molly can say "no," Elodie has already gone on.

Ladino was the language of Spanish Jews, a mix of Spanish and Hebrew -- like Yiddish, but with Spanish instead of German -- today there are very few speakers left, almost none, but my point is, it is actually *breathhtaking* to imagine a moment in time when Jews felt so secure, they invented a whole new language perfectly suited to that country, I mean, you don't invent a *language*, unless you feel *really* fucking at home somewhere, and of course we know how that turned out -- expelled, forced conversions, burned at the stake, the works -- American Jews haven't done that, there's no combination of Hebrew and, I don't even know, Valley Girl? -- which suggests they understand that America, which has been their home and given them refuge may turn on them someday, perhaps sooner than they realize, I mean, stay tuned, right? So. Then you have the American Jew who hates Israel or is highly critical of Israel and I would argue part of why they feel able to be so critical of Israel is because they feel so safe in America, because they've convinced themselves that they can stay in America forever and maybe that's true now but if history is our guide and history must always be our guide then you have to ask, so you feel safe today but will that be the case a hundred years from now? Or ten?

ELODIE – 2

They hate us for controlling everything,
which is confusing, cause they've been pretty successful at killing us the last two thousand years,
if we controlled everything wouldn't we have done a better job of at least controlling how often they kill us?

But.

Most of all,
they hate us because they cannot understand how we are still here.

How is it possible?

We have been attacked,
beaten,
burned,
converted,
expelled,
robbed,
raped,
gassed,
enslaved,
tortured,
for thousands of years,
and still, we are here.

We are still here.

How?

Are we all Houdinis?
Saw us in half, somehow we're still alive.
Annihilate us in your gas chambers,
we'll send back Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi,
even our dead girl's diaries are masterpieces.
The world wants us dead and in return what do we give them?
Einstein and Freud,
Kafka and Proust,
Bernstein, Arendt, Chagall.
Names that ring out like planets,
Universes of thought and genius.
And still
they hate
hate
hate
hate
hate us.

4. LUCIEN, IRMA, ADOLPHE

LUCIEN

22 stores.
0 pianos.
3 months until factories are up and running--
4 months.
5 months until pianos are ready to ship--
6 months.
6.
6 months.
And until then... (*unspoken: I'm fucked*)

Young Pierre emerges.

Think: June July August September October November -- November pal. We'll have new pianos to sell a month before Christmas. You couldn't ask for better timing.

To himself

And until then... (*unspoken: I'm fucked*)

To Young Pierre

Cause people need music. Especially after... They need pianos. There's gonna be a lot of demand. A lot.

To himself

Who the fuck buys a piano right after a war?

ADOLPHE

Of course, you will do whatever you think is best, and you can do anything, you are more than capable. But it's nice to be at the store, just to be there, because that's the place, you know. It's our place. And it's a nice way to make a living. Work is always hard it always is, but some people work their whole lives, it doesn't mean much to them, and isn't much appreciated by anyone else. Our work brings joy. In homes all across France, children learn to play on pianos from our stores. That's what we do. And it put food on our table.

How lucky are we?

IRMA

Stop telling me to stop! You've been telling me to stop all day, *you* stop! You of all people. You were with me, here in this apartment, meal after meal, at this table, *this* table, for two years, while I was losing my mind, never knowing where the children were, how they were, what was happening -- not knowing anything! Not knowing, my mind running away with the most frightening, the most -- so much worse, letting your mind imagine -- so much worse than knowing the truth not knowing not knowing never knowing—

5. MOLLY, PIERRE

MOLLY

No, you listen, Daniel, you—you want to know how I feel? Listen, I'll tell you. Every weekend, for a year now, I got on a train and came to Paris, and I'd wonder, what was my great-great Grandma Lucie thinking? How could anyone leave France? My Nana says she wanted adventure, and she got a job as a governess for the Rothschild families, maybe that's true. Or maybe she sensed something, and fled. I'll never know. But as frightened as I am about the future of my own country, I can't help but feel grateful that she made it her home. Cause if she hadn't? I wouldn't exist.

You go wherever you need to to be safe, because the truth is, you can fight for what's right wherever you are. But you have to be alive to do it.

PIERRE

I didn't know what to do. But in the end, I went with Papa. There's no good reason. I just wanted to be near him. Because once Grandfather Adolphe died, I was all he had and he was all I had. And we were together like that until the day I married your grandmother. I went from one optimist's home to another, and that was good for me. I needed that.

Because after '45, no one wanted to hear about the war. But at the store, I could keep them all alive. I could hang a picture of Colette, presenting flowers to the President of France, Albert Lebrun. And you know something? No one has ever looked at the photo and asked, "where's your sister?"

Papa has been dead more than fifty years. I have kept the store going all this time, longer than anyone who came before me. And once again, Papa has saved my life, because if I had become an engineer, at some office, I would have felt very alone. Instead, I go to work each day, I see the pianos, the old advertisements, I see our name on the door, and I know they are with me. And I go on.

Stay together. Stay with your parents. You have to. In the end, it saved my life.

6. ADOLPHE, IRMA

ADOLPHE

They are in a small apartment, somewhere in the mountains.
Irma stops to listen.

After they were arrested, they spent a few nights in Paris, then they got away and went to the mountains. Somewhere safe. That's where they are.

IRMA

In the mountains.

ADOLPHE

Yes. It's very beautiful where they are. And Lucien's found work tuning pianos.

IRMA

He has?

ADOLPHE

Yes. He tunes pianos. There's a music school nearby, so he has a lot of work. And the school even has a few Salomon pianos, so he goes to work, he tunes the pianos, he sees our name and thinks of us, and all our stores all over France.

IRMA

Twenty-two stores, Adolphe.

ADOLPHE

Twenty-two stores. And as he tunes them, he thinks about how one day, he will teach his son to run the stores, then Pierre will take over and the stores will go on forever.

IRMA

They will.

ADOLPHE

And Eva has taken in some sewing, so between the two of them, they're getting by. It's cold in the mountains, but they're fine. And the children are in school, they're doing well, even Colette.

IRMA

Ok, that I don't believe. Colette's sweet but... (*unspoken: not that bright*).

ADOLPHE

Well, she's taking her studies seriously, for once. And this morning Pierre woke in their apartment in the mountains and turned fourteen. Eva saved her rations to bake him a cake, it isn't very sweet, there isn't much sugar, but he has a cake, and Lucien bought him a Swiss Army knife so that when he's in the woods hiking with his friends if he needs to cut through a rope or whatever boys do at that age, he will have a little knife in his pocket he can take out.

IRMA

And Robert is... Robert is alright too.

ADOLPHE

He's alright. He's... working for France. Making buttons.

IRMA

Buttons?

ADOLPHE

When the war is over, France will give him a medal.

IRMA

They already gave him a medal, for the Great War.

ADOLPHE

Well now he will have two. And our children will come home, we'll all be together, and everyone will get along beautifully.
Quick beat. They both laugh.

IRMA

That's funny.

ADOLPHE

It's your fantasy...

IRMA

No, they'll come home, after about ten minutes they'll start arguing, and I'll yell, "Robert! Please! You haven't seen your brother in four years!"

ADOLPHE

He'll accuse you of always taking Lucien's side.

IRMA

I do not.

ADOLPHE

He'll accuse you, anyway.

IRMA

I don't always take Lucien's side.

ADOLPHE

And Jacqueline will encourage Colette not to take a second piece of cake, Colette will start to cry, Eva will ask what happened and she'll say Aunt Jacqueline called me fat, and Eva will say don't you call my daughter fat don't you dare and Jacqueline will say I never said she was fat I just know she's been unhappy with her weight I was trying to encourage her, then Eva will storm off and you'll have to console Jacqueline because she'll be quite upset and she'll say I try and I try but no matter what I do it's never right it's never enough I give up. And that's how the reunion will go.

Beat.

IRMA

I can't wait.

7. MOLLY, DANIEL

Right. Ok.
Hey, I'm gonna go to bed now.

DANIEL

Did I-- are you upset?

MOLLY

Yeah. A little. Yeah.

DANIEL

Ok... I don't-- ok.

MOLLY

I-- I actually have a fair amount of, uh, experience with people like you, in my life.

DANIEL

Oh do you?

MOLLY

I do. And in my experience, people who say things like, *of Jewish extraction*, are actually *more* dogmatic about religion than religious people, so I try to avoid the subject with those who clearly have disdain for-- me.

DANIEL

Uhm. Wow. Ok. Well, I'd say it sounds like you actually have disdain for me, but...

MOLLY

I don't.

DANIEL

Well that's not how it sounds to me.

MOLLY

Ok.

DANIEL

Ok. Well. Good night, Daniel.

MOLLY

Beat

DANIEL

I upset you.

MOLLY

Yes. You did.

DANIEL

I apologize.

MOLLY

Ok.

DANIEL

That was not my intention. I apologize. Genuinely.

MOLLY

Maybe, you know, maybe it's people like you who've made it impossible for me to feel proud of who I am.

DANIEL

Maybe it is.

MOLLY

It's people like you who take territory that isn't yours--

DANIEL

I haven't taken any territory--

MOLLY

And build settlements--

DANIEL

Molly--

MOLLY

And force people off land that is rightfully--

DANIEL

Molly!

MOLLY

What?

DANIEL

I don't want to talk about Israel.

MOLLY

Ok. Then why are you standing here.

DANIEL

I was just trying to get to know you.

MOLLY

And I was trying to get to know you. I came to you, very genuinely, with an open-- and then you turned it around and made all these assumptions when you don't, you don't even know me.

DANIEL

I'm sorry.

MOLLY

I was just asking how you became religious. That was all I wanted to know. If you didn't want to tell me, you don't have to, but you don't have to be, uhm...

DANIEL

I'm sorry.

MOLLY

Ok.

8. MARCELLE, PATRICK

PATRICK

That is the craziest thing I have ever heard.

MARCELLE

I know.

PATRICK

That is the craziest thing I have ever heard.

MARCELLE

You said that.

PATRICK

I can't believe he's-- Have you ever even been to Israel?

MARCELLE

Once, maybe ten years ago, we took the kids.

PATRICK

And?

MARCELLE

It was ok, it was interesting.

PATRICK

That is the craziest thing I have ever heard.

MARCELLE

Ok that's not helpful anymore.

PATRICK

So Charles is there now?

MARCELLE

Yes.

PATRICK

With Daniel?

MARCELLE

Of course with Daniel. You think he'd miss a chance to visit the holy land?

PATRICK

And Elodie?

MARCELLE

Elodie had a... she was supposed to go, who knows with her.

PATRICK

You're a psychiatrist, you would know.

MARCELLE

You would think.

PATRICK

I can't believe they went to-- for how long?

MARCELLE

A few days.

PATRICK

But what are they even doing?

MARCELLE

Checking things out, looking around, I don't know. Seeing apartments.

PATRICK

Oh my god.

MARCELLE

He wants to leave before the election.

PATRICK

Oh come on! She's never going to win.

MARCELLE

You think I haven't been telling him that for months? But now that America elected--

PATRICK

But Americans are idiots.

MARCELLE

The most powerful nation on Earth...

PATRICK

Idiots. We have our issues but, France will never elect Le Pen, it will never happen, never.

MARCELLE

Can I get that in writing?

PATRICK

It will never happen.

MARCELLE

Charles says once he has an offer, he'll announce he's leaving the practice--

PATRICK

He's serious?

MARCELLE

He's in fucking Israel looking at apartments, I think he's serious.

PATRICK

But he spent the last thirty years building that practice.

MARCELLE

And his partners said they would buy him out.

PATRICK

But, I mean, you can't rebuild a practice it took you thirty years to build, overnight, in a new country --

MARCELLE

You think you're telling me something I haven't told him, a hundred times --

PATRICK

And you're just going to let him?

MARCELLE

He's a fifty-eight year old man, I can't stop him.

PATRICK

But what about you?

MARCELLE

What about me?

PATRICK

I mean, you didn't go with him.

MARCELLE

Correct, I am here, talking to you, in front of you, so--

PATRICK

Then, what's going to happen?

MARCELLE

I don't know, I guess he and Daniel will find a place in Israel, I don't know.

PATRICK

No but I mean -- will you two be together?

MARCELLE

Not if he's in another country.

PATRICK

So you're, you're talking about divorce?

MARCELLE

Oh. No. It hasn't gotten there yet. He still thinks he can convince me to go.

PATRICK

But you would never. You would never! Would you ever?

MARCELLE

No.

PATRICK

You can't go. You -- what would you do in Israel? We're French. We're -- And you're the most French person I know. Look at you! And, and your family is here, your friends, your *job*, your -- you spent the last fifteen years fighting for that promotion you could just walk away from that?

MARCELLE

No, I could not.

PATRICK

You, in a desert?!? *You?*

MARCELLE

I don't even like going to the beach, Patrick, not even for a visit. Why would I want to *live* at the beach? A beach with no ocean? Endless beach, and no ocean? Kill me.

PATRICK

I mean, they have the sea there, they have --

MARCELLE

I know that. It was a -- forget it.

PATRICK

So you're not going.

MARCELLE

I don't know.

PATRICK

What does that mean?

MARCELLE

It means, I Do Not Know, what I am doing. I'm not single. I don't get to make this decision on my own. I'm part of a family, I'm part of a couple, there's a lot to weigh.

5. YOUNG PIERRE, IRMA, LUCIEN, PATRICK

PATRICK

A few weeks go by. Macron defeats Le Pen. Just like I told everyone he would. I hear nothing from my sister. We aren't speaking. I know -- you're shocked. I think about calling...
He looks at his phone.

Fuck her. She can call me.

His phone rings. He considers.

Fuck her. I don't want talk to her.

He sends the call to voicemail.

YOUNG PIERRE

Talk to your sister.

PATRICK

This is an obsession of my father's -- talking to my sister.

YOUNG PIERRE

What else is there, once your parents are gone?

PATRICK

All my life, whenever Marcelle and I fought, he'd say:

YOUNG PIERRE

She's your baby sister.

PATRICK

So?

YOUNG PIERRE

You know how rare that is, in this family, to still have your sibling?

IRMA

When my sister died, we were separated by an ocean.

LUCIEN

My brother was killed in another country.

YOUNG PIERRE

My sisters were killed meters from where I stood.

IRMA

I learned she died in a letter. I never said goodbye. I didn't attend her funeral.

LUCIEN

What funeral?

YOUNG PIERRE

I was their kid brother.

IRMA

I have no one left, to talk about my childhood,
remember my parents with.

LUCIEN

No one to work beside. Argue with. Rage against.

YOUNG PIERRE

There's no one left to protect me now.

IRMA

I hope it won't always be like this, for our family.

LUCIEN

I hope so, too.

YOUNG PIERRE

I hope so too.

PATRICK

Jesus Christ. What a guilt trip.

YOUNG PIERRE

Just call your sister, sweetheart.

PATRICK

When she wants to talk, she'll call me.

YOUNG PIERRE

She did! You sent it to voicemail!

His phone rings.

Young Pierre stares at Patrick, desperately hoping he'll answer.

PATRICK

Gently, to Young Pierre

Ok.

