

Please Forgive Me

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Chapter 1

I want him to know how sorry I am. I want to beg his forgiveness. For all I didn't understand, for all I never knew, for all I still have to learn. But the police have him and I can't get to him. My baby. My son. My child. Why am I hesitating to say it? To use the most obvious description? Because I generally gloss it over, try to act like it doesn't matter - why make everyone uncomfortable and bring it up? But it does matter. It is important. So here it is: My beautiful *black* boy.

I married late. Thirty-five already when I met the man who appreciated my over-salted popcorn, my distracted housekeeping, my early 5:00 a.m. runs. I bumped into him in a bar, during happy hour, with half priced drinks and greasy appetizers that left misshaped oil puddles behind on the plate. He'd smiled, brushed off the long island iced tea I'd left behind on his shirt, as if liquid could simply be wiped off of linen, I'd smiled, and within half an hour he'd rescued me from the all-male table of colleagues I'd been straining to have a conversation with.

I work at a bank and my co-workers are mostly puffy white men, who shift their feet uncomfortably when I bring up stories about my son, Miles. Like the time Miles asked me why none of the comic books he brought home from the library had black superheroes in them. Miles was only six years old at the

time and Black Panther hadn't yet made it to the movie screen, and when he'd mentioned the concept of a black superhero, I'd literally been struck dumb by the notion. I'd stood in the middle of the kitchen with my hand on the refrigerator and my mind churning, trying to both picture the novel idea of a black superhero for the first time, while also come up in the moment with a reasonable explanation for why my son hadn't yet seen one. The story as I told it to my colleagues was meant to be funny. I had meant it as, *Can you believe it? Had you even noticed that before? Who knew, but there are like no popular black superheroes. I mean, in some books Hawkman is sketched a little darkly, but you can only pretend he's black if you look at the pictures sideways. How dumb am I not to have noticed this before?* I had meant it as a revelation, like Wow! And wouldn't they share in the curiosity of my new discovery. But instead, most of my co-workers turned away at my stories, changed the subject, or most remarkably of all, got angry with me for bringing up an uncomfortable subject.

The past sixteen years had been a lifetime of revelations about a world I hadn't known existed. And now it had culminated in this. My black son, behind bars, alone, likely scared, possibly hurt, while I had to wait, impatient, angry, desperate, wishing I could make it all better, but not, at the moment, being enough for him. Had I ever been enough for him?

I remembered when I first researched adoption, thirty-seven years old at that point and steeped in the knowledge that my eggs were antiquated and mostly dried up, like mini lima beans baked in the sun. I came across an article by a black woman that told white women to stay away. *Black Children Need Black Mothers*, it was titled, and the essence of the argument was that white women should not even consider adopting black children; that inter-racial adoption was, frankly, dangerous. At the time I was so stunned by the idea that someone would be against my adopting a child – a black boy, for that matter, the child most likely to be left behind, looked over, passed by, left in the system until he'd aged out - that I thought I must be reading the article incorrectly. I must have missed something, an “and” or a “but” or some other qualifying contraction somewhere. I had to read the

article two more times before I understood what the author was trying to say. White women simply don't have what it takes to raise a black child in America.

I had assumed up until that point that adopting a marginalized child, saving a life from the system, giving a kid a home and a chance, was a good thing. Admittedly, it sometimes made me uncomfortable when friends I'd mentioned the idea to reacted as if adopting a black child was profound and extraordinary (didn't people adopt babies all the time?), but at the same time, I never stopped them, never refused any accolades, never explored why it might be making me edgy to be praised for adopting a child. I had basked in the flattery of my mostly white friends, and entirely white family, as if my husband and I really were good people, about to do a great thing.

But then here was this black woman, salt and pepper hair, large hoop earrings, earnest facial expression staring out at me from the computer screen, telling me to stay away from her kind. Informing me that, by definition, I would be a terrible mother for a black child. My blood pressure ticked up as I reread the article and I thought, this woman doesn't even know me! If she only knew me, she'd see that my heart was in the right place. She'd understand that I mostly tried to do good.

But after the third reading I felt deflated, in large part because it offered no hope. The article implied that there was nothing my husband nor I could do to remedy the situation. We couldn't work to change the circumstances. We couldn't not be white. We could only stay away.

Up until that point I'd always prided myself on my work ethic. I was an A-type personality, determined, driven, resolute in my goals. I ran three miles a day, whether I was tired or not, I worked long hours at the bank until my evaluations rained down praise, I was even right this minute researching adoption like a conscientious person, trying to make a major life decision in an informed and thoughtful manner. Yet this very research was telling me that I was an inherently wrong person and that there was no way I could ever be right.

I realized later that it was the kind of message black people had been hearing for years.

At the time, though, my reaction was to call an old high school friend from Detroit.

“Hey girlfriend,” Tiffany said, sounding happy to hear from me. Tiffany had been my best friend throughout my teenage years, and we’d spent hours on the phone in high school reassuring each other, supporting each other, trying to make sense of the world together. The sound of her voice was the sound of my past and her easy enthusiasm brightened my spirits.

“How’s Michael, Rohan, Gisele?” I asked.

“They good, they good, you know, getting bigger all the time, especially Michael.” I laughed, recalling Michael’s increasing waistline. We were all getting bigger, older, more seasoned.

“So,” I eventually said, bringing the conversation around to the purpose of my call. “I think we’ve decided to, well, adopt through the foster system.” There. I’d said it. I’d spit it out. In the moment of silence between us my hands prickled with sweat. I imagined Tiffany responding, *Umm, why? Whatever gave you the idea that you could do that?*

But instead she said, “Oh Rachel, that’s wonderful. I’d stopped asking what you had all decided because you seemed to get angry at me the last time I brought it up. Even though, well, you aren’t getting any younger.” It was true, it’d been a rather long time since Tiffany and I had last spoken, and it was because I’d gotten sick of her always asking what Nathan and I had decided regarding kids. Just because all of our other friends had them, did that mean we had to too? Was it some kind of social obligation? What if I just didn’t want to (though of course, I did)? I found out later that Tiffany kept bringing the subject up because she’d wanted us to have kids around the same time, so our children could be friends. She hadn’t been trying to pressure us, so much as share something with us. At the time, however, I’d misunderstood and found her questions oppressive, so I’d backed away. But listening to her voice again now, I was reminded of why I loved Tiffany so much, why we had always been such close friends, why we had never lost touch after high school, though many other friends had faded away. Tiffany always told it like she saw it. She was blunt, frankly, and that was why I’d called.

“I know,” I sighed. “I’m sorry. But, well, we are looking into adoption options now.”

“That’s great,” she replied, giving me the space to go on.

“There’s a lot of paperwork involved, it’s crazy. You have to check what you’re comfortable with, what you think you can and can’t handle. The checklist is two pages long. Developmental problems, yes or no? Autism, yes or no? Drug exposure, yes or no? African American, yes or no?” Hearing myself say it out loud, I realized only then that ‘African American’ came in a list of options that were mostly negative.

“You can handle anything,” Tiffany said, without hesitation. “You’ll be a great mother, I know it. Just do it.”

And with that indirect affirmation, I chose to assume that my closest black friend had just told me it was ok to adopt a black baby. I chose to move forward, and disregard the salt and pepper lady with the extra large hoop earrings.

Looking around the waiting room at the police station sixteen years later, however, echoes of that long-ago article suddenly came back to me. A white mother will fail to teach a black child his culture, it said. She will not understand his experience in the world, and he will grow up isolated, confused, and ill-prepared to protect himself in an America that will judge him harshly and do it’s best to keep him down. A white mother *can not understand* what it means to be black in this country, and so it is *dangerous* for a white woman to raise a black child. It is unconscionable for her to even try.

Staring at the gray tile floor beneath my feet, at the brown cement walls of the unforgiving police station, I finally had to admit that the author had a point. I never should have adopted my son. I was not a good mother after all. I had indeed failed to protect my baby from this not unpredictable fate. He never should have been given to me in the first place.