

# **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 reach him. My baby. My child. My son. 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-two 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 back, 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. When my son 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 door and my mind spinning, trying to both picture the novel idea of a Black superhero for the first time, while also deriving 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 irrelevant parenting stories.

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-four 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 made me uncomfortable when friends I'd mention 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 purred, seeming happy to hear from me. Tiffany had been my best friend throughout my teenage years, and we’d spent countless 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. I asked Tiffany how her family was doing.

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

It took me a minute, but I eventually brought the conversation around to the purpose of my call. “Nate and I have decided to, well, adopt. Through the foster system.” There. I’d said it. I’d spit it out. In the moment of silence that landed 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 squealed approval. “I’d stopped asking,” she added, “because you got angry at me the last time I brought kids 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 if I was going to have kids already. Just because so many of our friends had them, did that mean Nate and I 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 it up because she’d just wanted us to have kids around the same time, so our children could be friends. She hadn’t been trying to pressure me, so much as share something with me.

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

“That’s great,” she said supportively, 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 if it's a girl, remember to name her after me."

I smiled, recalling the time Tiffany had saved my life by pushing me out of the way of an oncoming school bus. She'd always been more aware of the world than I was; too often I stood oblivious, lost in thought. That belching yellow school bus had given me such a scare, however, that I'd promised to name my first child after her, something she'd never since let me forget.

"Thanks," I replied earnestly, "and you know it." And with that affirmation, I chose to assume that my closest Black friend had just told me it was ok to adopt a Black baby. I decided 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.

## Chapter 2

*T*here was an evening, about five days after we'd brought Miles home from the hospital, where everything was perfect. I had just changed his diaper, fed him a bottle, swaddled him up tight, and brought his warm precious body close against my chest. His lips were pursed in a contented sleep, and I watched as his breath went in and out between them. I wanted to kiss them, but I refrained, afraid of waking Miles up. I sat in a rocking chair and sang softly to him instead, old lullabies that I knew my mother had sung to me.

My husband was still with us then. He hadn't left yet for the better job, the younger colleague, the easier life. He was still watching TV, beer in hand, a bag of Doritos splayed across his lap, when I'd gone downstairs later that evening. I had turned to him with Miles still in my arms and asked, "Can you believe this? That they just up and gave us a baby?" And we had both laughed, full-throated, from the gut. Miles had woken up then and gurgled along with us. Because if you thought about it, it was totally nuts that a stranger, with the blessing of a few officials and a mile of paperwork from the state, could just hand us a perfectly good baby and let us go home. Crazy.

But I was so, so glad that they had. Those first few months when Miles was a baby were blissful. I'm not saying that

he didn't keep us up all night crying and making a fuss, I'm not saying that he didn't regularly get sick in my hair, or spill formula on the carpet, but the problems were simpler back then, more obvious, more easily correctable. I didn't have to guess what was wrong, or wonder if there were years of institutional history behind it. I didn't have to consider if his Blackness or my whiteness made any difference about what to do – he was just a baby and he was either hungry, tired, or cold. And I was just a mother, ready to help him.

Things started to change when we started going out of the house more with Miles by our side. There was a Starbucks a couple of blocks from our home, and one Sunday morning I convinced my husband (though he wasn't much of a coffee drinker) to get up and get dressed and walk with us to the coffee shop for lattes and early morning pastries. I tucked Miles into his brand-new stroller, braced him on either side with a few of the myriad, colorful stuffed animals that now populated our home, and walked through the neighborhood with my husband and child. We were a happy family, a unit, a threesome that was at last whole and complete.

It was a glorious morning. The sun was shining brightly, the summer air heavy but clear. Our neighborhood was middle class, with broken sidewalks and streets that badly needed repaving, but everyone took care with their own patch of lawn, as if insisting that better things were yet to come.

I'd never had much of a green thumb, but I'd tried the first few years after we'd moved into our own home to plant a few things and make our garden colorful. The rose bushes I'd carefully picked out from the nursery and planted deep in the soil had been eaten by rabbits, nearly to the roots. I'd been shocked at the complete desecration, as if the voracious appetites of these surreptitious animals were a personal affront to my hard work. I tried hydrangeas next and they'd bloomed, but then disappeared as swiftly as they'd arrived. Magnolias were described to me by the arborist as easy going, as if they liked to stay out late and have a few drinks, but I found them to be recalcitrant, leaving the party early and never making another appearance. I planted a few more things but my heart was no longer in it. I took to apologizing to



the bushes as I brought them home from the nursery, knowing they were likely going to die. After a delicate pink shrub made it through an entire year, but then withered away the next, I decided that a green lawn with no adornment was actually better. Neater. I kept on Nate to make sure it was mowed every two weeks.

As we neared the Starbucks I turned to my husband, who was looking straight ahead as if focusing on the finish line of a very distant race. His mood was always so inscrutable. I could never tell if the slight upturn of his mouth was a faint smile, or a sardonic frown. He was my man of mystery, like all the fairytales described. Miles cooed and I bent over the stroller and cooed back, “Your first trip to Starbucks, it’s an event!”

Strangers passed us on the sidewalk and I imagined them thinking, my, what a cute family, aren’t they adorable? I looked for their smiles and appreciative head nods, like I always gave when I passed young families with newborn children on the street. So I was surprised when a middle-aged man in jogging shorts and t-shirt glanced inside our stroller, and grimaced. He quickly turned his head to the side, as if he was only just taking the measure of the neighborhood around him, but he’d done a poor job of hiding the disgust that had momentarily stamped his features. Stunned, I stopped in my tracks.

“Did you see that—” but my husband had turned away.

“C’mon,” he said a few moments later, “I want to get back to make snacks for the game.”

I didn’t know what else to say exactly, and I knew my husband hated any kind of a scene, so I pressed my lips together and walked on. When we got to the coffee shop no one cooed our baby, no one asked us how old he was, no one told us he was beautiful.

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But I knew that he was beautiful. No one needed to tell me. And not just beautiful, but smart and sweet and impressively coordinated. Miles was crawling in no time, and before we were

prepared for it he was walking, careening around the house and following us from room to room. I'd park Miles in front of an Einstein video in the living room and go to fold laundry in the bedroom, but within minutes he'd have toddled to my side and gripped a hold of my leg with both arms. I'd swing forward, limping to the dresser with my son firmly attached to my leg, and we'd both devolve into laughter when he eventually fell off. When I went to make dinner later in the evening Miles would bop along behind me and settle himself in the middle of the kitchen floor, observing my every move like a concerned movie director. I'd pause to look into the pools of his deep brown eyes and see oceans of love and wonder. Did I mention how good he smelled? Like fresh cut pine, with a hint of lavender behind it.

I'll admit it now, I indulged Miles, perhaps too much. It got to the point where he never wanted me out of his sight. It was as if he knew he'd lost one mother already, and he was absolutely determined not to lose another. My husband made grunts of annoyance when he saw us moving, even into the bathroom, like a duck and her chick, but he didn't say anything. His only voiced intolerance came at night, when it was time for bed. I would have let Miles sleep with us without a second thought, but Nate refused. From the day we brought him home from the hospital Nate insisted that Miles sleep in his own bedroom.

"Children shouldn't sleep with their parents," is as detailed an argument as I ever got about the matter, but it was done. Nate let me have my way in raising Miles in most respects, so I gave in on this. I've sometimes wondered since if this was Nate's single feeble attempt at keeping our marriage alive; an attempt to carve out a space for our love to bloom and grow, rather than wither and disappear as it eventually did.

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Miles began talking in full sentences just after he turned two years old. He'd been saying a few words and phrases before

then, *Mama, Dada*, and *tank you* being his most frequent, but I'll always remember the day he simply started talking.

We were on the floor of his bedroom and the sun was streaming into the room in patterns as the wind outside rustled the late summer leaves and trees. We'd finished playing first with his red and blue trucks, then with his plastic phone that lit up and made astonishing noises, and we'd just moved on to the baby puzzles he'd gotten for his birthday. There were two, a chunky alphabet one cut out of wood where the goal was to fit each letter to its place in the board, and a similar board puzzle, but with the cutouts being of various large trees. The alphabet puzzle had so many pieces I thought it might overwhelm him, so I started with the tree puzzle. I turned the board over and watched my son giggle as the pieces tumbled to the floor. I picked up a large green elm and put it in its slot to show Miles how it was done. He picked up a weeping willow and worked to fit it in the bonsai's spot. His lips pouted in a frown, but he kept trying to fit it in the same slot. After a minute I reached over to help, and that's when he looked up at me and said with certainty, "No mommy, I do it."

I stopped perfectly still, withdrew my hand, and just watched him. The determined brow. The body bent over in concentration. The fingers that wouldn't stop moving.

He looked like my mother, committed to making a wrong right. He looked like my grandmother, a woman who brooked no failure. He looked to me, and I smiled, recognizing the confidence in his clever wide eyes. He was clearly one of the family.

# Chapter 3

*I*t was two in the morning when I'd gotten the call that my son had been arrested. The proverbial single phone call. Luckily, I'd been awake and answered it. Usually, that late at night, I was asleep and my phone was in silent mode, but I'd happened to stay up late binge watching Netflix, and when I'd realized Miles had missed curfew, I decided to keep watching until he came home. I'd remembered to turn the sound up on my phone after getting nachos from the kitchen.

I wasn't particularly worried at first. Miles had only missed curfew a few times before, and never by more than an hour, so I figured he'd be home soon. He just lost track of time, I thought, or traffic was bad for some reason. It wasn't until my phone rang from an unspecified number, and I realized quite how late it was, that I sensed something might be wrong.

"Hullo," I answered, my voice scratchy from lack of use. I coughed to clear it.

"Mom, it's me. I'm-, I'm at the police station. Can you come get me?"

My heart started beating so loudly I thought Miles might be able to hear it.

"It's nuthin," he continued, "I didn't do anything wrong. It's- It's- Just come get me, ok?"

“Of course, ok,” I said. “Are you al—”, and the line went dead.

I threw a jacket on, grabbed the wrong purse, and rushed to my car. I didn’t stop to think of what it might be helpful to bring, or who I should call for help, I didn’t think of anything but getting to the station. Our conversation had been so short; my son had told me nothing. Had he witnessed a robbery? Tried to break up a fight? Been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Well obviously he’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but how bad was it? Anything could have happened and as I drove to the station my mind bounced from one awful imagined scenario to another. I had to keep reminding myself that at least he was physically ok. He hadn’t been involved in a deadly car accident. He hadn’t been shot. I’d heard his voice on the phone, just minutes before. And from what I could tell, he seemed physically ok.

I drove into the police station and parked haphazardly in the uncrowded parking lot. Grabbing my purse, which I realized only then had nothing in it but my wallet – no Kleenex, no ibuprofen, no pen, no chap stick, none of the items I always needed the minute I didn’t have them - I rushed into the building and strode up to the front desk, breathlessly asking to see my son. The reticent officer behind the partition yawned, and told me to have a seat. Somebody would be with me in a minute. I fought the urge to argue with him, turned, and sat on the hard wooden bench in the middle of the waiting area.

Would there be no end to my needing to learn how to navigate this world with an African American son? Did I really need yet another lesson about how inadequate I was in this maternal role I’d ignorantly chosen for myself?

But of course the answer was yes, and then yes again. If I hadn’t been up for the challenge, why had I adopted a Black son in the first place? Had I really been that ignorant of all that it would entail? Of course I had known that there would be gaps in my knowledge; I had sensed that things would be hard at times. And as I had told Miles repeatedly over the years, every time he complained about homework, or chores, or going to taekwondo practice, life was not easy. No one was ever promised that their

life was going to be easy. You had to work hard for anything good in life. If you wanted an A on a term paper, you had to spend hours in the library doing research. If you wanted to lose weight, you had to go to the gym for weeks on end. If you wanted your son or daughter to love you, you had to put the time in, and expect it to be something of a challenge. Life was a struggle, you accepted it, you didn't complain, and you certainly didn't give up.

This was all true, and I of course knew all of this, and yet, what I had failed to fully comprehend, and what I had definitely failed to prepare Miles for, was the fact that your goals and dreams could be snatched from you, despite all the hard work and effort in the world, in the blink of an eye and for no good reason, particularly if you were Black. What I had never wanted to confront was that life was also simply arbitrary, and often, unfair.

*My son is a good person,* I wanted to scream.

Once, when Miles was five years old, we were walking to our front door after having parked the car in the street when we'd come across a little girl sitting on the curb, crying. Her red dress had bunched up in her lap and her skinny knees were sticking out vulnerably. I noticed a single puff of grass stuck in the nook where the curb and the street met. Miles had looked to me but I'd shrugged my shoulders, not knowing why she was crying. I tried to pull my son along but he'd let go of my hand and walked up to the girl.

"Why are you crying?" Miles asked, with the forthrightness of children.

"My sister won't play with me," she'd replied, her pig-tails swinging. "No one will play with me."

Miles sat down on the curb next to her and offered her the toy he'd been carrying all afternoon – a superhero figurine he'd only just gotten for his birthday, and which he'd been coveting for months.

The yellow haired girl looked at Miles, her tears no longer flowing, and accepted the toy from him. They played together for twenty minutes before she'd stood and happily run off.

When I asked Miles later why he'd stopped to play with her, he said, "I had to Mommy, she was so sad."

My heart still swelled with pride at the memory of his easy empathy.

When Miles was in second grade I discovered that he'd stopped eating lunch at school. I first noticed something was going on when he ran in from the bus stop in the afternoon and went straight to the pantry to gorge himself on crackers and cookies. I thought he was going through a growth spurt. Then I worried he was ruining his dinner. But days passed of this behavior and neither occurred.

Watching Miles stick his arm down another box of Chicken Biskits one day, I asked, "What, don't I pack you enough lunch?"

Miles looked at me like a bird whose wing had caught mid-flight, like a child whose mother had just discovered his secret.

I walked to where he stood in the kitchen. "Miles?" I asked. "What's going on? Aren't you getting enough time to eat lunch at school?"

"Yes. But I don't eat it," he finally admitted. "I give my lunch to Michael."

I tried to picture Michael, who I assumed was some bully demanding my son's food every day, but I couldn't recall anyone who looked like a bully in Miles' class.

"Brown hair, brown eyes," Miles offered, "like me."

But I still wasn't sure who it was.

Miles put away the crackers and sat down heavily at the kitchen table, like an old man. An old man who was ready, and relieved, to finally be getting the family secret off his chest.

"Michael never has a lunch. His mom doesn't pack him one, and he's not signed up to get a school one. I don't know why," Miles added, sensing the question before I asked it, "but he doesn't get a school lunch. He goes hungry unless I give him mine."

“But--, but then you go hungry,” I said, concern for my own son trumping that of a stranger’s.

“Yes, but I always know there’ll be food when I come home.” He pointed to the pantry, well stocked with his favorite crackers, cookies, and soups, and I nodded. The implication seemed to be that Michael didn’t have such certainty.

I wondered what to do next. Call the school and let them know a student needed a free lunch? Try to figure out who Michael’s mother was, and call her and offer help? Miles shook his head at both of these options, sensing that they would be embarrassing for Michael, and maybe even get him into trouble.

“Can you just pack me more?” Miles asked. “Like two lunches, and then we can share.” My son had grown up hearing me repeat the importance of sharing so often, I couldn’t refuse. Besides, I knew that if I didn’t, Miles would simply not eat so that Michael could.

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I sat in the police station and recounted all the kind instincts that were inherent in my son. How he picked up litter when we walked in the park and carried it, unasked, to a garbage can. How some of his very first words were *tank you*, and how he never failed to say them when anyone did anything at all for him. How he gave hugs freely, to anyone, whenever he was asked.

I looked down at my hands and recalled the time we came across a homeless man, asleep on the sidewalk just outside the doorway of a drug store. It was an incongruous sight, a grown man in his day clothes, boots and all, asleep on a couple of flattened cardboard boxes. My instinct was to step around the body and simply keep going. It was Miles who stopped, despite the smell, despite the oddity of a body in the middle of the sidewalk, and asked if he was alright. Miles had wanted to know if we could do anything. I remembered feeling embarrassed that I’d tried to just step around the situation.



Miles was a friendlier, kinder, better person than me in so many ways. Why didn't the world see that? Why didn't these officers see that? Whatever they were accusing him of, I was certain there was no way it was true.