

Seeking Forgiveness

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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-four 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-five 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

There 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 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 myself, but I'd tried the first few years after we'd moved into our 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 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 smirk. 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 Nike 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?” I asked my husband, as the man swiftly moved past us.

But Nate refused to follow my gaze. “C’mon,” he said after a moment. “I want to get back to make snacks for the game.”

I wondered for a second if I’d seen what I thought I’d seen, but my husband’s refusal to look me in the eye made me certain. I didn’t know what else to say, so I pressed my lips together and walked on, not bothering to glance again at the jogger now well behind us. When my family 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.

* * *

But I knew that Miles was beautiful. No one needed to tell me. And not just beautiful, but smart and sweet and surprisingly coordinated.

“Look at that,” I exclaimed one afternoon, when Miles pulled himself up by the coffee table and toddled two steps forward. I glanced at Nate beside me on the couch, tapping away on his phone.

“That’s great,” he said distractedly.

Miles giggled and fell over and I went to him and picked him up. “Good job,” I cooed, kissing my son’s chubby cheeks. “You’re practically walking!”

Within months Miles was careening around the house and following me from room to room. I’d park him 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 made dinner in the evenings Miles bopped along beside me for awhile, and then settled himself in the middle of the kitchen floor and observed my every move, like a concerned movie director. It was as if he knew he’d lost one mother already, and he was absolutely determined not to lose another.

“You smell so good,” I told Miles after dinner one evening, bending over to kiss the top of his head. “Like pine,” I kissed him again, “with maybe a hint of honey behind it.”

“You compliment him too much,” Nate said, walking by.

“Can you compliment a child too much?” I’d asked, surprised by the very notion.

“Of course you can. He’ll start thinking he’s king of the world, then he’ll be spoiled, and then we’ll have a brat to deal with.”

For years I’d appreciated Nate’s honesty and ability to help me focus on reality when I let my dreams and crazy ideas get the best of me. He’d counseled me on how to talk to my colleagues at the bank – how not to expect too much help from them, and how to instead offer my own assistance in a way that made them feel complimented and smart. It had worked wonders

in that I'd gotten two raises and a promotion since I'd started taking Nate's advice. But this time, his advice just sounded mean.

"I've got to pee," I said, straightening up and walking towards the bathroom. Miles pushed himself up off the floor and followed me, clearly planning on heading into the bathroom with me.

"Isn't that a bit much?" Nate asked. "You look like a duck and her chick, but I don't think even ducks go to the bathroom together."

Perhaps I did indulge Miles too much. But truth be told, I adored the devotion. I treasured having someone need me so much they refused to let me out of their sight even for a bathroom break. "We're bonding," I called over my shoulder, and didn't draw the door to a close when I entered the bathroom.

That evening, when it was time for bed, Nate finally drew a line. "No," he said, stopping my hand when I pushed the covers aside to make room for Miles' tiny body in our bed. "Children shouldn't sleep with their parents."

So I went with Miles into his bright blue bedroom and stayed up with him until he fell asleep in my arms. Nate didn't seem to have a problem if I stayed up late into the night with Miles, I just had to do it in a sitting position, in the rocking chair in his bedroom, or on the couch in front of the TV. Miles simply couldn't enter our bed. Looking back, I've sometimes wondered if this was Nate's single feeble attempt at keeping our marriage alive; if it was his attempt to carve out a space for our love to deepen 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*, 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. We'd finished playing first with his red and blue trucks, then with his plastic phone that lit up and made astonishing noises, and finally with his Mega Bloks that snapped together in colorful towers. I'd wondered if it was time to take a nap, but instead pulled out the baby puzzles he'd just gotten for his birthday. "Let's try these," I said, and Miles nodded encouragingly.

There were two puzzles, 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 Miles, so I tipped over the tree puzzle instead. Miles smiled as the pieces tumbled to the floor. I picked up a large green elm and slid 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 the piece into the same incorrect slot. After a minute I reached over to help, and that's when Miles looked up at me and said with certainty, "No mommy, I do it."

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

He reminded me of my mother, committed to making a wrong right. A woman who'd volunteered with the homeless and knit countless blankets for the sick. He reminded me of my grandmother, brooking no failure. A woman who'd taught herself bookkeeping when my grandfather refused to let her attend college, and eventually landed a decent job. Miles looked up at 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 to answer 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 got held up 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 beat so loudly I thought Miles might be able to hear it.

"They've made a mistake," 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 to tell what was going on, I didn’t think of anything but getting to the station. Our conversation had been so short; my son had told me practically 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, to demand to see my son that very instant. Instead I swallowed, turned, and found a seat on the hard wooden bench in the middle of the waiting area.

A middle-aged woman with a large bosom and even larger purse sat across from me. Her face looked tired, her cheeks drawn. We glanced at each other for a second, and then she turned away and closed her eyes. When they didn’t open again, I realized she was praying.

I closed my own eyes for a minute and thought about all the ways in which my son was a good person. How he picked up litter when we walked together in the park and always carried it, unasked, to a garbage can. How some of his very first words were *thank you* and *please*, and how he never failed to say them when asking for anything or if anyone did anything at all for him. How

he gave hugs freely whenever he was asked, even past the age when most kids stopped giving their parents hugs in public.

Once, when Miles was five years old, we were walking in the neighborhood 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 in front of her. I noticed a single puff of grass behind her legs, stuck in the nook where the curb met the street. Miles looked at me but I'd shrugged my shoulders, not knowing why the girl was crying. I tried to pull my son along but he'd let go my hand and walked up to her.

"Why are you crying?" Miles asked.

"My sister won't play with me," the girl replied, her pig-tails swinging from side to side. "No one will play with me."

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

The yellow-haired girl looked at Miles, her tears no longer flowing. She reached a hand out and accepted the toy. They played together for twenty minutes before the girl stood and happily ran off. When my son returned to me I told him how proud I was of him for stopping, and making the effort to brighten the day of a stranger.

I looked down at my hands and my broken red fingernail polish. Miles was a better person than me in so many ways. We'd come across a homeless man once, asleep on the sidewalk just outside the doorway of a drug store downtown. It had been an incongruous sight, a grown man in his day clothes, boots and all, asleep on a couple of flattened cardboard boxes. My instinct had been to step around the body and simply keep walking, as with the girl crying on the curb. Miles' instinct was to stop, despite the smell, despite the oddity of a body in the middle of the sidewalk, and ask if the man was alright.

I continued to recount all the kind instincts that were inherent in my son; his generosity, his playfulness, his easy empathy. It occurred to me for a brief moment that most of these memories were from his early childhood, that since he'd become a teenager he'd grown aloof, abrupt, uncaring even, but I let those

thoughts fly right out of my mind, like a mosquito that buzzes your ear, but then is quickly gone. The disciplinary calls he'd recently been getting from the high school I pushed even further from my mind.

Miles is a friendly, affectionate, misunderstood person, I told myself. He shouldn't be here. Whatever he was being accused of, there was no way it was true.