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SEVEN STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL APOLOGY

horrible cunt hope u burn in Hell wth hitler 🔥🔥👤

The text bubble glowed in the dark bedroom. Nicole had been shocked out of sleep by the phone beeping and shuddering against the glass nightstand. She blinked at the small screen: 3:14 a.m. and an unfamiliar area code. It had to be a wrong number—just an angry stranger misdialing into the night—but it still turned her stomach. She had guilt the way others had intestinal ulcers or eczema, too easily inflamed. She powered off the phone and lay back into her pillow. Everything was fine, she assured herself. And tomorrow would be better than fine. Moreno would never have e-mailed “Come by my office at 2 for the big news” if the news wasn’t good.

“OWIE! OWIE! MOMMY! DADDY! MOOOOOOMMY!”

Nicole opened her eyes to find morning light filtering through the white curtains.

“Bloody hell. Can you calm them?” Her husband, Jai, spoke without lifting his graying head from the pillow.

Rubbing her stiff neck, Nicole shuffled down the hallway to where the girls were screaming and stomping on the parquet floor. For the first time since the January move-in, the apartment’s windows had been left open overnight, and a cool spring breeze carried the rush-hour honks from West End Avenue.

“Priya hit me!” screamed Esther.

Nicole crossed her arms, and the two girls raised their imploring black eyes to her. They also had Jai’s black hair, but their skin came halfway between his Bengali brown and her Pale of Settlement snow,

a pale unlike anyone else in her family. Her red hair, natural until recently, was also odd. *Some ancestress must'a been raped by a Cossack*, her mother once told their hairdresser, years before Nicole knew what rape was and her mother forgot the word for hair.

"Priya, why did you hit Esther?"

"She. Called. Me. Fat!"

Her dimpled arms were propped on a roly-poly waist, lips pursed between two bulbous cheeks. Fat kids were cute kids, but maybe it was time to stop caving in to her constant demand for french fries. Then again, the poor girl had decades of calorie counting, stair-mastering, self-hating ahead. Why shorten the respite of childhood?

"Esther, it was wrong to call your sister fat. But Priya, what did we say about physical violence? It's the biggest no-no. So you have to apologize first."

"NO!" Priya squeezed her eyes, causing her cheeks to puff out still more. "NO! NO! NO!"

"Like mother, like daughter," Jai muttered, wedging past, bitter over the loss of shut-eye. Not so long ago, her husband would mock his wife's obstinacy, her ability to turn any trifle into high drama, with a suppressed smile and a flare of affection in his eyes.

Nicole frowned at Priya. "If you don't say you're sorry, then no Friday chocolates for you!"

A low blow delivered instead of a teachable moment. Her daughter's plump face crumpled with indecision. Nicole pictured, like in a cartoon, the girl's head turning into a Snickers, a bag of M&Ms. And then, the little face calmed and widened with a triumphant grin.

"I won't say it, won't say it, no! Because I'M NOT SORRY!"

"Fine! Esther will get both her Friday chocolates *and* yours!"

Nicole stormed past Priya's welling eyes toward the kitchen, by far the nicest kitchen she and Jai had shared in their ten years of marriage. And today she planned on sitting at its lovely marble island, sipping freshly ground Birch coffee while brainstorming tonight's Facebook

post, the exact kind of post she detested: “So humbled to be tenured today—”

“Hey!” Jai called as she passed the bathroom. “Your fuc . . . your phone woke me up. Beeping in the middle of the night! Was it Thomas again? Thomas with another hilarious quip? *Parfait bon mot?*”

“Jesus Christ, Jai. It was a wrong number, O.K.? You’re going to give me a hard time, today of all days, about a wrong number?”

He drew the razor up his foamed neck. Every morning he shaved and donned a pressed shirt, researchers at pharmaceutical companies having to present as both scientist and businessperson. “Last night, all through *A Ghost Story*, you kept tweeting, tweeting.”

“Texting. It’s just that Thomas had this guy over”—she made sure the girls had disappeared into their rooms and lowered her voice—“from Grindr. Nickname: BottomsUp1994.”

“94? As in *born*? We were already in university.”

And only three years away from meeting each other, on a balmy September day, when a fire drill forced them to wait on the steps of Princeton’s old Neuroscience Institute. Both first-year doc students, they still looked like kids, he newly arrived in the States, wearing unfashionable pleated pants and square-rimmed glasses, she sporting purple feather earrings, a vestige of her artsy days. The first Sunday morning she woke up on the futon in his basement studio, she trumpeted the loudest fart she could, then cackled while he, scandalized, widened his eyes. Afterward they set out hand in hand for the lab. There were no days off.

“BottomsUp’s an Instagram star. Posts pictures of vegan meals from food trucks or something like that and has over a *hundred thousand* followers! That’s ninety-nine thousand more than the Frishman Center.”

Jai shook his head in disbelief, and she playfully poked his soft arm. She hated to remind him, but Moreno would probably take her out for drinks tonight, not to mention everyone would be coming by her office with their congratulations, so she wanted the time this morning to steam her best blouse and swipe on mascara:

“Don’t forget, it’s your turn to take the girls to school.”

Jai loudly tapped his razor against the sink, but then stopped and said in a softened voice, “I know, Nickles. Enjoy this day. I’m very proud of you.”

Step 1: State in full what you’re apologizing for. The injured party needs to know you understand what you did wrong.

The subway platform reeked of fried-egg sandwiches, over-cologned office workers, and the longtime homeless man slumped on the bench. While rushing down the stairs, Nicole splashed her second coffee on her ivory blouse. She tried to ignore the giant stain. It sucked to ruin her favorite blouse, but it would suck even more to let that ruin even one minute of this day, the reward for over twenty years of labor: first a BS from NYU, while waitressing at The Red Lion to pay Greenwich Village rent; then the Princeton PhD, no small feat considering she got a C in high school chemistry only because Mr. Saviolodis was being generous; next the postdoc at Michigan, followed by the one at Johns Hopkins, and another at Hunter, while hoping for a faculty position to open in the city. At last came the six years at Astor University’s Frishman Center for Alzheimer’s Research, toiling over applications for NIH grants, struggling to publish in the right journals, teaching classes, serving on too many committees, all while striving for meaningful breakthroughs in her research, which—she wasn’t the only one who would say so—proved to be ahead of the curve, making early use of precision gene editing to reverse amyloid plaque formation.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a Brooklyn-bound local train two stations away.

Wasn’t it “two stations” ten minutes ago? Nicole pushed through the thickening crowd to peer down the tunnel. When left too long on a platform, she couldn’t help but hear her mother’s incessant “*Is the train coming?*” Lying in bed or standing before the fridge, her mother would ask: *Is the train coming?* That’s all Nicole heard over her freshman spring break while other kids were sun-soaking by Floridian

pools. When she came home for summer break, and her mother, only 46 years old but doddering like an octogenarian, was still asking about the train, Nicole tried answering: *Yup, it's coming down the tracks now; Nope, it's not coming for three more hours.* What happiness or disappointment the different replies brought her mother!—and then five minutes later: *Is the train coming?* Eventually Nicole demanded: “Where are you going, Mom?” Brow furrowed, sitting in the metal patio chair, her mother said, “To see Ma, of course. It’s her birthday.” Her ma, whose last birthday had been almost 40 years ago, turning 33 just days before dying of hepatitis, which she acquired as a child in the Vilna Ghetto.

Finally Nicole was swaying inside a subway car between two jabbering businessmen and a towering teenage boy. The boy, playing his phone game with both hands rather than holding a bar, kept falling on her. Realizing that she hadn’t turned on her own phone since last night’s rude awakening, she pulled it from her pocket and pressed on.

Buzz, beep, buzz, chime, peep, ping, buzz.

As the express train rattled past the tiled walls and steel pillars of the 86th Street Station, her phone exploded with notifications, flashing across the screen too fast to read:

Text: *Really, Nicole? So disgusting! Lucky the condo board—*

Facebook: *Exposed! Now must be deposed—*

Twitter: *meet racist terf islamophobe human-scum—*

Instagram: A picture of her speaking from a podium, a picture pulled from the Frishman website that she’d been meaning to change for two years because she was no longer quite so young and pretty, overlaid with white caps: LEARN PRIVILEGE WITH PROF. MILLER—

She felt hot. Queasy. These couldn’t all be wrong numbers. They used her name, image. She pressed Gmail, hoping an explanation was waiting in her inbox, but the train had sped out of cellular service range. She kept pressing Gmail, willing the “No Service” message to turn into signal dots. Come on! The teenage boy fell on her again, and she lifted her face to breathe the oxygen above the masses.

What could she have done? It had been two years already since she had ceased posting anything remotely controversial on social media. Could she have unwittingly made a “problematic” comment? She struggled to remember her last Facebook post: a GoFundMe for a burned and beaten Rottweiler named Amadeus Woof. The timing, her tenure. But what colleague would try to sabotage her? She wasn’t that beloved peer who always volunteered to do extra grunt work, but she was respected, liked well enough. This still had to be a mistake. The real target maybe some B-list celebrity who shared her name.

As the train lurched into Columbus Circle, the phone went wild again, insults bursting on the screen—*Bitch, Zionist Pig, disgrace, pathetic, rape apologist*—while a salvo of beeps announced dozens of new voice-mails: mostly unknown numbers, but also Jai, her dad, Dr. Moreno, and several from Thomas. And then they were off the grid again! She couldn’t wait to get to the office to deal with this nightmare. She switched off the phone’s sound, but every time the train charged through a station, it thrashed in her pocket: *bzzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzzzzzzzzz*.

Step 2: Make clear that you respect the victim’s feelings and understand that you hurt them. Do not use a conditional clause, like “If I hurt you, I’m sorry,” because this implies you don’t believe they should be hurt, and that the problem is with them, not you.

As Nicole emerged from underground into the sunlight of East 72nd Street, her phone resumed its alerts, including an incoming call from Thomas.

“Holy hell,” she answered, speed-walking for the office. “You won’t—”

“Nicki. Oh, Nicki. I’m so sorry. So so sorry, I . . .”

His voice was thick, uncharacteristically slow. She had been best friends with Thomas ever since they were painting majors together at NYU, and he was the only one at school who took the Long Island

Rail Road out to Plainview for her mother's funeral. He stayed awake with her all that night and actually made her laugh, laugh when she'd been sure guilt would never allow her to laugh again, least of all about her mother in her coffin. Lying sideways on her girlhood bed, hugging an old New Kids pillow, he asked with his hazel eyes twinkling, "So did her hair usually look like that? Like she was competing with Moe from the Three Stooges?" It had, at least for the last year, since her dad started cutting it, but who would say that? Especially after what she'd just told him, the grotesque way her mother had died, and how it was all her fault. The irreverence and honesty was so surprising, so lightning, she couldn't help but laugh. When she returned to campus the next week, she switched from painting to biology, but she and Thomas continued to meet every evening after classes. And in 23 years, as Thomas met life's compounding challenges, his Brooklyn apartments growing smaller along with his prospects for a solo show or life partner, she had heard him disappointed, cynical, drunk, but never slow, never strangled.

"Thomas. What's wrong?"

"Oh, god. You know that guy I had over, the Grindr guy . . ."

"BottomsUp?"

"Yeah, him. He—oh, god, it's so awful . . ." He gasped, then slowly exhaled. "He was pissed because we kept texting while he was over and . . . and maybe because he'd asked to borrow three hundred bucks, like all middle-aged men must have three hundred bucks lying around, and I said no, and . . ."

His voice cut out every time her phone buzzed, but she didn't want to ask him to hold on while she figured out how to turn off each app's notifications.

". . . and maybe I said something a little snarky, like, 'Where's the big bucks from your grueling Instagram job?' and . . . oh, Nicki, I'm so sorry . . . but while I was in the shower, the fucker read our texts and . . ."

She halted in the middle of the sidewalk. A businesswoman dodged her with a peeved glance over her shoulder.

Thomas continued, "And he was so . . . so horrified . . . he started broadcasting snapshots of them on his Instagram thingy. He prefaced with . . ." She heard the clicking on his keyboard. "He prefaced with '*Check out the texts this racist dickwad shot off while I was sitting next to his ugly ass.*'"

"Our texts? He broadcast our private texts to his hundred thousand gluten-freaks or whatever the fuck they are?"

In her panic, she couldn't remember a single message from last night, but being between Thomas and her, it could have been *anything*. "I don't even know what we texted."

"You don't want to know."

Nicole staggered over and leaned on a bodega's grimy old kiddie ride, a Mickey Mouse knockoff with a crazed grin.

Thomas cleared his throat. "For example, you texted, 'Is it wrong to be jealous of the women who were sexually molested by Casey Affleck?'"

Nicole squeezed her eyes, tried to stay calm. "O.K. That's obviously a joke."

"A joke a lot of people don't find funny. A lot as in *thousands*. Because you shouldn't be joking about it at all. That's what they're saying: it's insensitive to survivors of sexual assault."

"But I didn't tell it to survivors of sexual assault. I mean, I told it to *you*, but it's not like I told it to an auditorium—"

"Nicole! I'm just going to blurt this out. Because it's not just our texts. Maybe because our texts got so much play, I don't know, but while I was sleeping—it was stupid not to have a password on my computer, so fucking stupid—anyway, while I was sleeping, he forwarded years of our e-mails to his account and has been posting screenshots all day of the most . . . you know, *egregious* ones."

She couldn't quite believe it. She gripped fake Mickey's ears. "That's got to be illegal."

“And? Illegal doesn’t make them not *out there*. It doesn’t make millions of people stop thinking you’re a racist homophobic anti-Semitic white supremacist.”

“But that’s insane. We’re hardly the poster children for Stormfront.com. A Jew, grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, married to a Kolkatan. And a gay boy escaped from the trailer park.”

“Don’t worry, Pepe the Frog is having a field day with us too. It’s just Pepe doesn’t own many art galleries in Chelsea. How long you think before I’m fired? An hour? A day?”

“Fired? Can a person really lose their job because someone illegally posted their private e-mails?”

“Denial isn’t charming on you, Nicole. I’m a curator for a scrappy, holier-than-thou gallery in Bushwick. Our current show is titled *Brooklyn Inclusive*. But fuck the day job, I don’t give a shit about the day job. My own work . . . it will never show again! And I hate to say this, I really do, but the calls for your feather and tarring, Professor Doctor, are even worse. You’re more important to bring down, I guess, having farther to fall. I wouldn’t go to the lab right now. Why don’t you come here? We can drink ourselves into comas.”

BottomsUp1994 and his army of enraged gnats were worse than a coffee-splashed blouse, but even they were not worthy of ruining this day. What did these strangers matter really? Even if there were *thousands*. They weren’t her friends, her colleagues, her family. They weren’t her dead mother. Seconds after hashtagging Dr. Miller, they undoubtedly forgot her existence and carried on with their day. She should too.

“Thomas, this is a nightmare. And we’re going have to deal with our anger and waste time fixing it, but we can’t let these people *own* us.”

“Oh, Jesus. That’s Bushwick on the other line.”

Step 3: Express regret. Let the hurt party know that you are embarrassed and ashamed of your actions.

When she entered the lab, the graduate students who normally greeted her with sycophantic “Hi, Nicole!”s remained bent over their microscopes and vials. Only Lijuan, the new postdoc from Chengdu University, who spoke little English, gave her usual nod. She was processing a brain, and the fleshy wet coin smell mingling with the sweet toxic fumes of paraformaldehyde was more nauseating than usual. The freezer fans, long relegated to unheard white noise, now whirred too loudly, like low-flying, circling planes. From Nicole’s office came the insistent trill of her landline.

She hurried to her phone, pulled out the jack, shut her office door, and for the first time in six years closed the blinds on the glass wall facing the lab. Without flipping on the lights, she sat at her computer. Beyond the window, barges floated down the East River, past the brown buildings of Roosevelt Island and under the Queensboro Bridge, where an endless caravan of glinting cars ferried thousands of people in and out of Manhattan.

Over 300 unread e-mails cluttered her inbox, the scroll of subject lines so breathtakingly ugly she jumped to close the window. She Googled her name. All the first-page results that would have appeared yesterday were gone. Gone was her most cited paper in *Science*; her *New York Times* op-ed about in-home care for early-onset dementia; the dozens of lesser-read research papers, but no less important, all those hard-earned incremental contributions, the lab results, in-field observations, follow-up studies, painstakingly worded abstracts—all replaced with articles spawned overnight by a seemingly incestuous media orgy: *Buzzfeed*, *HuffPo*, *Salon*, *Hello Giggles* all boasted similar headlines: *Racist Prof Poised for Tenure at Leading University*; *Alzheimer’s Researcher Diagnosed with Incurable Bigotry*; *Top 10 worst statements by Nicole Miller (grab a puke bag)*.

A gentle rap at the door. Nicole turned with strands of red hair in her fist. She hadn't tugged out hair since the years after her mother died. "Killed" was the word her father used that night, unable to look at his daughter. Trying to sound natural, she croaked, "Yes?"

Lijuan poked in her head. "Dr. Moreno wants you."

It was nowhere near two o'clock.

Nicole rose and donned her lab coat as if it were armor.

Step 4: Explain how you plan to repair the situation. When repair is impossible, let the injured party choose an outcome that seems fair to them.

"You're just going to have to apologize," said Moreno from behind his paper-strewn desk. Shirtsleeves rolled up, undershirt peeking out of an open collar, he spoke with an endangered Queens accent. "Nothing else to do."

"Apologize?" She tried to make eye contact through his filthy glasses. "To whom?"

"The public." He laid papers before her. "Dean Wolff met with legal, and they consulted with a firm that specializes in these, you know, cases. They handled that comedian—what the hell was his name? You know, the one who joked about waterboarding his, uh, pet Chihuahua or something. Also that studio exec from—again I can't remember the production company—but that woman who . . ."

"I'm not a comedian. Or studio exec. I don't have a *public*."

"I don't know." He shrugged. "You're kind of getting your fifteen minutes here."

And how different they were from the 15 of her daydreams, where Terry Gross would lean into the microphone and ask how exactly her discovery was going to save lives.

Moreno opened his hands in a what-can-you-do gesture. "Think of it as apologizing to the students and prospective students and the parents of prospective students."

"Won't that imply that I'm guilty?"

She was Priya squeezing her eyes, puffing out her cheeks. A humiliating coincidence.

“Believe me, Nicki, I care about you. I asked the same thing. I said, shouldn’t we turn this around, put the flashlight on those *schifosos* who invaded her privacy, but legal was clear: apologizing was the fastest way to get this under control. Act fast, and by the time the real news outlets, the *Washington Posts*, the *New Yorkers*, pick up the story, they have to include the apology. Anything else—like suing the assholes—that would just keep you in the limelight longer. And the Frishman Center.”

Nicole could only stare at Moreno, gnawing her lip.

He nodded. “I hear you. The things we’d say to each other growing up in the neighborhood. If it’d been on the Internet instead of the street, I wouldn’t be sitting here. But, come on, Nicki, there is an Internet now and . . . and you don’t really believe parents should be allowed to euthanize severely disabled newborns, do you?”

Did she? If the disability entailed lifelong unmanageable nerve pain, then she wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure about so much. And she was scared of being wrong, of holding ideas that caused needless suffering, of standing, as they say, on the wrong side of history. But what could she do? No one was going to convince her of the prevailing ideas by making questioning them a crime. She didn’t believe in dogma. She was a scientist, for chrissakes! But she didn’t say this. Because this wasn’t a philosophical conversation; it was a practical one.

“I mean, Nicki, look at this printout from legal.” He held up an inch-thick sheaf of papers. “You’ve managed to offend everyone. Every single human being on the planet.”

He dropped the file in front of him and raised his glasses to read: “Trans people . . . What’s this about uteruses being or not being a female thing? Honestly, half the time I have no idea what you or your critics are talking about.” He skimmed the pages. “What else? Holocaust jokes. And a pedophilia joke. Actually, the joke insinuates that the child

was also murdered, so a sexually abused, murdered-child joke! And fundamentalist Islam . . ." He rifled until he found the right section. "This Islam stuff goes on and on—burqas and clitoridectomies and honor killings and terrorist attacks and the floggings and hacking to bits of adulterers and atheists and gays and . . . you just don't stop." He sighed and flipped the sheet. "Then there's cultural appropriation and pho and a bunch of other incomprehensible stuff. Several shots at BDSers. You even ridiculed us, which was disappointing, because conversations around hiring are confidential, and Alain may be blue-eyed and from a wealthy family, but he is from Venezuela and does have the last name Guédez, so technically a diversity hire. Honestly, Nicki, the only group you might not have pissed off is Trump supporters."

Nicole, finding herself pulling out hair again, clasped her hands tight. "I wrote long anti-Trump rants, too, but those didn't bother BottomsUp so he didn't publish them. But if he had, if he had published my diatribes against the Christian right and their creationism bullshit and climate change denial, would you make me apologize to them, too?"

Moreno's computer beeped. He glanced over, and then sat back in his chair, staring at the monitor. "Oh my god."

"Bob, what is it?" Nicole leaned forward, unable to stop herself from hoping it was about anything but her, an earthquake in California, a tsunami in Japan.

"Nicole."

"What is it?"

He read slowly: "*Maybe there's only one thing worse than putting an Alzheimer's patient out in the snow to freeze to death . . . Not doing it.*"

Nicole gripped the armrests.

"This?" Moreno wouldn't face her. "This from one of my researchers? How do you think our donors are going like that?"

She leaned forward, felt her face twisting. She remembered typing that joke into her phone, leaning against a hallway wall at Mount

Sinai. She had just finished an interview with a 60-year-old woman who, in the middle of being forced to admit that she couldn't remember her name or a single fact about herself, pissed her light-blue pants. Frustrated and embarrassed, the woman had jumped to her feet, but having no words to give her rage, she could only point at Nicole and shout, *Noooooo! Noooooo! Noooooo!*

Moreno waved at the monitor. "Who makes a joke like that? If this can be called a joke. Who?"

Hands pressing against the armrests, barely in her seat now, seeing her mother's naked hip poking out of the snow, she shouted, "I do! That's who! I make a joke like that!"

Moreno turned in surprise. He observed her over his grimy glasses, his expression equal parts shock, confusion, and fear.

"Please, Nicole," he said, showing his palms. "Don't say another word. Don't go showing me now, after all these years, a side I don't want to see. Please, stay calm."

"And if I refuse to apologize? What then?"

"What then?" He shut his eyes and rubbed his arms, as if he were the one under scrutiny. "Oh, Nicki. If only this had happened next week. You know what news I was going to give you today, but . . . the university's getting thousands of e-mails demanding that you be fired. And a petition's going around the faculty; it already has a hundred signatures. So, of course, it wouldn't be great timing to announce your tenure instead. The dean asked that we hold off until we see what happens after you apologize." He tapped the papers in front of her. "Legal drafted an apology for you, in case you couldn't quite manage, but they said it would be better if it were in your own words. There's a guideline here for what needs to go into an apology. Of course, whatever you write, legal will vet. And then we ask that you post it on all your own social media accounts: your Facebook, your Twitter, the university intranet. And if things are back to normal in two or three weeks, I can give you that good news."

Friday chocolates.

Moreno gazed at her, head tilted in kindness. “Legal said everyone apologizes in the end. You got until two p.m.”

Step 5: Assure the injured party that you won’t commit the same offense again. Otherwise, the apology is worthless.

Nicole walked back to her office, watching the tweets flare on her phone, a fast-flowing stream in which every once in a while, like a jumping fish, out popped a shock of violence:

*Praying @NicoleMiller gets hit by a bus. For her students sakes!
Racist teachers=racist future*

*No #rapeculture? May Prof Miller learn the truth the hard way.
#hopeithurts #poeticjustice*

*whore stop spreading LIES about islam! you could be killed for this
blasphemy!*

Nicole opened her door and recoiled when a backlit man rose from the seat in front of her window.

“I’m here to help,” said Jai.

Catching her breath, Nicole sat at her desk while Jai pulled a chair to the other side.

She said, “They’re insisting I make a public apology.”

He gave a *that sounds reasonable* nod, but he was clenching his knees, bracing. He knew her, and she knew him. Only thing she didn’t know, not anymore, was if he would stand by her.

She asked, “Is that what you insist, too?”

“I don’t see what choice you have, Nickles. It’s not like some other school’s going to leap to give you tenure. Do you really want to give up your whole life to defend—what?—people’s right to be racist? Is *that* what you want to be a martyr for? Now? When we have a psycho-clown in the White House? And Nazis carrying torches in Charlottesville? When we don’t even know if next year there’s going

to be a National Science Foundation? And you want to go down shooting at the left?"

Watching her husband shifting in his chair with increasing impatience, she wondered: could she possibly lose both her career and marriage today?

"What I don't understand, Nicole, is why you couldn't just ignore all that rubbish. You're an adult. You know how the world works—or at least you should by now. At some point, an adult looks around, takes stock of the world they find themselves in, and tries to do the best they can *in that world*. And all things considered, we have an *amazing* world. Of course, the whole world isn't amazing, but *ours*—our tiny lucky corner of it is very, very good. And it would be a mistake to throw that away over *nothing*. Stupid e-mails with Thomas."

Nicole turned toward the blinds, behind which she imagined her lab assistants sitting in front of their monitors, examining the data on the last batch of treated mice. Hopefully a significant number will have remembered again how to build a nest. A home.

She said, "I wish I knew what my mom would want me to do."

"Your mom?" Jai sprang to his feet and leaned over her desk. "Your mom? Newsflash, Nicole, your mom is *dead*! You can't make it up to her, never could make it up to her, because she doesn't exist anymore. But you know what does exist? You, your work, our nine-thousand-dollars-a-month rent, your living breathing children, and their expensive as hell private schools, and—yes!—me, your husband!"

He was shouting now, this man who usually released his anger in snide remarks.

Jackhammering her desk with a long finger, he asked, "Do you think it's some big coincidence that just this morning we were making the girls apologize? Do you? No, we go through that *every day*! Every day we're teaching them that keeping the peace is part of life."

Nicole wanted to grab that finger, so slender, so familiar, hold his hand. She said, "Jai, please, can we just discuss this, you and I? Please,

for just a second. What if—I'm only asking that we consider this—what if it's important that I don't apologize? Isn't that possible? Maybe there's an atheist in Bangladesh, or other professors, who are afraid—"

"First your mother, now *an atheist in Bangladesh?* I'm talking about our children and you come back with *atheist in Bangladesh?* Why do you think I moved to the States, Nicole? To New York City! Not for *this.*"

He shook his head and strode out of her office, shoving open the door. Nicole watched it soft-close behind him.

Minutes later, she was still gazing at the door's frosted glass when an envelope appeared underneath. As she walked over and picked up the old-fashioned white envelope, she fought off her dizzying dread with hope, the absurd hope that the letter might be from someone supportive, someone who had surmised that she would have stopped checking her e-mail, texts, and voice-mail. But who? Her father? It still pricked, how he had managed to keep loving her. Thomas? Yet another reason to feel awful: she had given her best friend no thought. On the front of the envelope was penned *To: Prof. Nicole Miller.*

She didn't need to fully unfold the letter to know it wasn't good. No addresses, no signature, it had only two typed lines:

WE'RE NOT KIDNAPPERS, WE'RE RESCUERS. WE SAW PRIYA'S PICS ON FACEBOOK AND SHE IS TOO SWEET NOT TO SAVE FROM YOUR HATE.

**Step 6: Thank the injured party for listening to your apology.
They didn't have to.**

"Where did this come from?" Nicole shouted, holding the envelope up to the lab.

A bearded, baby-faced postdoc shrugged and said, "It was left downstairs, with the doorman."

Nicole hurried for the elevators. One was landing on first, the other sitting on the 11th. Should she dash down 18 flights? She joggled the down button again. Of course, it was almost certainly an empty threat. Only meant to do exactly this: terrorize her. What kidnapper would give a heads-up? But she couldn't risk it. She was all over the Internet,

stirring fury in millions: one nutjob out of a million wasn't against the odds.

Out on the street, she scanned for yellow, but cabs rarely circled this far east. She ran down 67th Street with her hand in the air. Several taxis flew past, riders tucked inside. As she was jogging up to First Avenue and its stream of cabs, her kitten heel slipped, twisting her ankle.

"Seventy-seventh and Columbus. And hurry!" she said, clambering into a cab that had barely come to a stop.

The cabbie turned on the meter. "Hurry, hurry, always hurry."

Nicole's heart thumped as they sat at a second red light with the driver talking Urdu into his earpiece. On the TV screen bolted under the bulletproof partition, a woman in a white skirt suit chirped, "MyCity.com is Manhattan at its most luxurious! A one-stop-site for all the finest rentals and condos."

After an excruciating eight minutes, they were entering the sunken roadway that cut across Central Park. The school was right on the other side. Every muscle in Nicole's body tightened with such readiness, such yearning, that in comparison the rest of the world around her didn't seem quite as alive, quite as real. It had been 23 years since she had felt this kind of urgency. Over those years, she had thought she'd felt urgency—when rushing to catch a flight, when reviewing experiment results, when deciding this morning whether to apologize—but those urgencies never made the rest of the world detach. The stone bulwarks flanking the roadway, the young tourists walking hand in hand down the sidewalk, the sunlight flashing through the vernal leaves above, the park's happy aroma of lilacs and car exhaust—it was all so keen, but at a remove, leaving only her and the loved one she was rushing to and the feeling that if she didn't get to that loved one in time, the world that had detached would never come back, not entirely.

Her father had said, "Just keep an eye on your mom until I get back. Five hours tops."

He was heading out to help newly divorced Uncle Mike move into a rental apartment while the rest of Long Island was at the mall, mak-

ing the most of post-Christmas sales. She hadn't seen her mom much since the summer, getting out of Thanksgiving by claiming a trip to a nonexistent boyfriend's family. Her mother no longer waited for a train, mostly no longer knew what a train was, but that day was one of her better ones: when the phone rang, she didn't jump in fear, but kept watching *Meet Me in St. Louis* on the staticky TV.

Maybe if she had jumped, Nicole would have declined when the caller, Paul—her eighth-grade crush, now a six-foot-tall engineering sophomore at MIT—asked if she needed a lift to Laura's, where the high school crew was reuniting around cases of Red Dog. She glanced at her mom, at the spittle gleaming in the corner of her mouth. The movie wouldn't end for an hour. She'd be back before then.

"Mom, I'm going out for a minute. Just watch TV, O.K.? Don't get up from the couch." A minute, an hour, she wouldn't know the difference, and she'd have no reason to get up, a diaper under the elastic-waisted pants, a diaper her father must have put on. He must be cutting her hair, too, with an actual bowl. It looked ridiculous.

She nodded. "O.K., Nicki."

A shaky, emotionless voice, but she had used her name.

It was closer to three hours before Nicole came through the front door again. Standing in the unlit foyer, scared her father might have come home early, she called, "Da-ad?"

Nothing. Only canned laughter from the television.

Relieved and still tipsy, she headed for the family room. Turning the corner, she found the TV throwing blue light on an empty couch. The lace patio-door curtains were blowing into the room, along with a whistling cold.

She ran through the open door onto the backyard patio. The motion-sensing lights snapped on, illuminating the snow-heaped picnic table, the leafless branches of the ash tree, and the footmarks, deep and dragging, through an otherwise pristine white blanket. The trail continued past the reach of the patio light and into the dimness before the fence.

Nicole stumbled into the snow, pushing against the knee-deep powder, while the rest of the world detached. Up ahead, her mother's chambray pants lay flayed on the snow. And then she spotted the naked hip, peeking out of the drifts like a shark fin. The patio lights switched off before she reached her mother. In the blueness of night, her mother lay on her side, eyes closed, nude body looking surprisingly young against the snow, brown triangle of hair. She had even ripped off the diaper.

Later, Nicole would learn that in her last moments, her mother had behaved normally; even the most cognitively abled feel overheated before dying of hypothermia and often strip. If only she had switched on a light before going to her party, maybe her mother would have figured out where to head back. Instead, her nails were packed with wood, as if—while Nicole was only blocks away, making out with Paul in his Saab—her mother had tried to claw her way to warmth through the fence.

At last, Nicole was knocking beside the open door of Priya's classroom. The children, sitting cross-legged on colorful rubber tiles, turned their round, trustful faces from the teacher to the panting intruder.

Marker poised over a chessboard poster, the young teacher took in Nicole and her white lab coat. "Yes?"

Before Nicole could speak, Priya had jumped to her feet. Charging through her schoolmates, she cried, "MOMMY!"

Nicole fell to her knees as Priya smashed into her arms. Hugging tight her sweet stubborn dumpling of a daughter, Nicole felt the world reattach, a world narrowed down to a pricey private school that looked little different from the public one of her youth: pale light sheening on the hallway's vinyl floor, bulletin boards pinned with crayoned suns, the nostalgic smells of pencil shavings and rubber erasers joined by the newer scents of dry markers and hand sanitizer. She breathed in the doughnut-y smell of her daughter's neck and said, "They're teaching you *chess*?"

Step 7: Lastly, after you have done all of the above, formally ask for forgiveness. Remember, this is a request, not a demand. Most people, however, do not want to be in conflict, so forgiveness is usually granted when requested properly.

Nicole limped out of the school on her swollen ankle and turned toward home, where she would call Moreno. She considered sending Thomas a pic of herself hobbling through the city, lab-coated with a coffee-splashed blouse and storm of twisted and torn red hair, captioned: *Escaped from Bellevue*. But maybe that was insensitive to the mentally ill. It was doubtful Thomas would be sending any funny pics of his misery. She supposed other people would come along who couldn't be muted, who would shake their heads and refuse to apologize, and when they did, she would silently cheer them from her lab.

Walking past the Citibank, she caught her reflection ghosting along its windows. She stopped and turned to the image hovering beside an ad for mobile checking. Staring at her gaunt, fallen face, that tired and craven middle-aged face, she said, "Forgive me."