

ACTS OF CONTRITION

by

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SUMMARY

What exactly constitutes an apology, whether voiced in public arenas or by regular folk in the privacy of our homes and offices? Is it enough to say “I’m sorry *that...*” (the offense happened)? Or “I’m sorry *you...*” (were offended)? Or must an apology begin “I’m sorry *I...*” (committed the offense)? Must responsibility be taken? Or can the event be dismissed as an accident, an unintentional slip of the tongue due to ignorance or diminished faculties, or simply a misunderstanding? What are the possible effects of a sincere apology? An insincere one? What does it mean to forgive? Who benefits? Are there some offenses that are unforgivable? Does forgiveness require more than an apology?

This play explores the theme of forgiveness in seventeen discrete two-character scenes. It raises questions about the nature, purpose, and dynamics of apology, repentance, and regret, as well as the need for and cost of giving, getting, delaying, withholding, and negotiating forgiveness.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

There are 22 characters in 14 two-character scenes. Scenes 1, 4, 7 and 11 feature the same couple. The play can be done with as few as 6 performers

SETTING

Here and Now

Bare stage with minimal set pieces. Blocks of various geometric shapes could work.

PRODUCTION NOTES

At the discretion of the Director, scenes may be omitted if a shorter running time is desired. While the pre-curtain song and suggested curtain-call song could be played in their entirety, only a few seconds of songs introducing individual scenes should be played—just enough to cover the scene change, set the tone, and—in some cases—be recognized by the audience. Some possibilities are listed below; directors are invited to consider other songs that would be appropriate for their audiences.

SCRIPT HISTORY

Writing of first draft supported by Djerassi Resident Artists Program, Woodside, CA
Additional drafts resulted in:

Reading: Pittsburgh New Works Festival
Reading: Baltimore Playwrights Festival

Production (non-professional): Edinburgh Fringe Festival
Production (non-professional): Slippery Rock University, PA

Winner, Kaleidoscope Arts Festival Playwriting Contest
Second Place, Goshen Peace Play Contest
Third Place, Kernodle New Play Competition

SCENE SYNOPSIS

Scene	Action
1. The Tango	Nicky starts to apologize, but instead implies that Nat should. Nat's indignation culminates in a counter apology.
2. Mind & Body	Body and Mind exchange apologies for mutual betrayals.
3. Anger Management Class	Dad tries to get Lucy to apologize for hitting a sibling, but Lucy presents a series of uncanny arguments that drive Dad to lose control.
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4. The Wii Tennis Match	Nicky insists on Nat's being <i>heartily</i> sorry, but Nat claims apologizing is an act of the will, not the emotions.
5. Last Two Minutes	With two minutes to live, Pec begs Grace for forgiveness.
6. Concentration Camp	Ezra berates Sol for forgiving their persecutors and is undone by his own hatred.
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7. The Wrestling Match	Nat presses Nicky for a joint apology. Nicky's defensiveness almost drives Nat away.
8. Friends' End	Barb wants to end her friendship with Judy, who resists letting go.
9. Prison Visit	Noz, jailed for the murder of a transsexual, is visited by his victim's mother, Bessie, who claims to forgive him.
10. Prodigal	Charles the betrayer and Margaret the betrayed obliquely negotiate how their post-betrayal lives might be played out.
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11. The Fencing Match	Nicky expresses regret that Nat was offended by Nicky's behavior. Nat challenges this with the definition of "apologize." They reach a surprise resolution.
12: The Lonely Goatherd	Pru tries to persuade her famous Client Magnus to apologize for a public <i>faux pas</i> , but Magnus isn't sorry.
13. Café Nirvana	Sam apologizes to Tori for bad behavior, but Tori rises above the offense and perhaps even—punitively but humorously—above the relationship.
14. Wake-up	With the help of Gabby, Adam searches for a way to repent and make restitution for a life of selfish exploitation.

Some Possible Classic Songs for *Acts of Contrition*

“Who’s Sorry Now?” (Patsy Cline)

“I Apologize” (Bing Crosby or Dinah Washington)

“I’m Sorry” (Bo Diddley)

“I’m Sorry” (Brenda Lee)

“What Can I Say, Dear, After I Say I’m Sorry?” (Bobby Darin or Kay Starr)

“Someday You’ll Be Sorry” (Louis Armstrong)

“I’m Sorry” (The Platters)

“I’m Sorry” (John Denver)

“Forgive And Forget” (Nana Mouskouri)

Curtain Call: *Non, je ne regrette rien* (Edith Piaf)

Note: The songs and recordings of them are copyrighted. Permission to use must be obtained.

Scene 1: The Tango

Pre-curtain music fades as lights come up on Nicky and Nat. They dance the tango, with moves appropriate to their lines.

I'm sorry. NICKY

No, *I'm* sorry. NAT

It was my fault. NICKY

You don't have to— NAT

No. No, I want to. NICKY

Really, there's no need to— NAT

I feel the need. NICKY

All right then.... But I shouldn't have been so...I should have known better. NAT

(*Beat.*)

Well... Yes. That's true. You should have. NICKY

Oh. Really? Well, you know, maybe... NAT

What? NICKY

Maybe I *would* have if... NAT

If what? NICKY

If you hadn't been so— NAT

NICKY
It's not like you gave me a *choice*.

NAT
So it's my fault?

NICKY
Well...

NAT
I thought *you* were apologizing.

NICKY
I *was*! I *am*! I've certainly been *trying* to.

NAT
(Beat.)
I'm sorry.

(Lights down.)

Scene 2: Mind and Body

Music fades as lights come up on MIND and BODY. They are identically-dressed, middle-or-old-aged men, though MIND looks younger than BODY, in better shape. They peer at each other, their gestures mirroring each other, touching hair, frown lines, circles under eyes, etc.

MIND

It's hard to believe we're the same age.

BODY

The body ages faster than the mind.

MIND

Doesn't have to.

BODY

I guess I do owe you an apology.

MIND

Where would you even start?

BODY

Be nice.

MIND

Okay. You pick.

BODY

Well, let's see.... If I had listened to you, we might not be so different.

MIND

Right.

BODY

Of course, gravity does its work regardless.

MIND

So does pizza.

BODY

If you're going to be like that...

MIND

I'm sorry. Go on with your litany.

BODY
 What?

MIND
 If you had listened to me...

BODY
 If I had listened to you, I wouldn't be blowing my cash on booze and butts.

MIND
 Amen.

BODY
 If I had listened to you, I'd be on the stationary bike in the basement instead of the stationary couch in the TV room.

MIND
 Now you're getting hot.

BODY
 If I had listened to you, my personal ad would've said "looking for a relationship" instead of "looking to get laid."

MIND
 It didn't say that!

BODY
 It said "Avid bowler looking to share good times."

MIND
 Well that's—

BODY
 —a wadda-ya-call-it for getting laid.

MIND
 Euphemism?

BODY
 Whatever.

MIND
 It's not too late, you know...to start listening to me.

BODY
 Aren't you tired of nagging?

MIND

Sometimes, yes. But I can't give up on you. We're too close for that. Anyway, it's not like I have a choice.

BODY

If you did, would you? Give up?

MIND

Some do, I guess. But the results aren't pretty. Would you want that?

BODY

No...I guess not.

MIND

Anyway. It's not like *I* don't owe *you* an apology or two.

BODY

You think?

MIND

Don't you remember the time I bullied you into driving to the beach even when you were falling asleep?

BODY

We both paid for that.

MIND

The time I made you play in the finals when you kept telling me you were sick?

BODY

Yeah. Gross.

MIND

How I shamed you into running that marathon for lung cancer?

BODY

And ended up in the E.R.

MIND

Of course you could have done all those things easily if you had been paying attention to me in the first place.

BODY

I thought you were apologizing.

MIND

Sorry. But we've had good times too. When our teamwork was spectacular. Like when we learned to play the guitar and got all those gigs. Or how about when we aced the General Psyc final freshman year of college?

BODY

Well, that was you more than me.

MIND

Hey—you wrote all the notes and pulled the all-nighter.

BODY

Only because you made me.

MIND

What about the first few years of marriage? Both of them.

BODY

Yeah. We were on the same smooth track then.

(Beat.)

MIND

So how's it going to end—our sometimes tender, sometimes tempestuous relationship?

BODY

If you take off first, I won't be worth much.

MIND

True. But if you go first, I won't know what to do with myself. I mean without your help, what I have to offer isn't worth a whole lot.

BODY

I guess we just have to hope we go down together. But not any time soon, right?

MIND

Right. Of course, you *could* increase our odds...

(Pointedly.)

by listening to me.

BODY

Hey!

MIND

What?

BODY

Shut up.

(They smile. Lights.)

Scene 3: Anger Management Class

Sound of ball bouncing against wall, then floor, wall, floor, wall, floor, etc. Sound fades as lights come up on eight-year-old LUCY and her DAD.

I don't want to say I'm sorry.

LUCY

You have to.

DAD

Why do I have to?

LUCY

You know why: because hitting your brother was a bad thing.

DAD

You almost hit him once. I saw you.

LUCY

And then I said I was sorry.

DAD

Not right away. Only after you went to Anger Management class on Thursday nights.

LUCY

But I said it.

DAD

Do *I* have to go to Anger Management class?

LUCY

This *is* Anger Management Class. Now say you're sorry.

DAD

But I don't *feel* sorry. Wouldn't it be a lie? Do you want me to lie?

LUCY

Saying you're sorry might help to make you *feel* sorry. Try it.

DAD

But Joey took my ball.

LUCY

It's important to share.

DAD

LUCY

But we weren't supposed to have to share. He had a ball of his own. And he lost it. So he took mine. That was stealing. He did a bad thing too.

DAD

And he will have to apologize for it. But you're going first.

LUCY

Why?

DAD

Because hitting is worse than stealing.

LUCY

What if one person just hits a little tiny punch and the other person steals a million dollars? Or what if one person hits a big strong guy and another person steals from a poor old lady? Then what?

DAD

I'm proud of you for posing such challenging ethical questions. And we will pursue the answers with serious Internet research. *After* you apologize.

LUCY

I didn't mean to hit him. It was an accident.

DAD

What?

LUCY

I saw my ball on the shelf in his room so I went in. I bent over to get it and when I came up, he was standing right there and my elbow knocked against him. It was an accident. I didn't do it on purpose. You don't have to say you're sorry when something wasn't your fault.

DAD

Yes, you do.

LUCY

Why?

DAD

If you go to someone's house to have a snack and accidentally break a glass, you still say you're sorry.

LUCY

For what?

DAD

For being careless about how you held the glass or how you put it down. "Accident" only means not intentional. It doesn't mean no fault.

LUCY

But I wasn't careless. Joey came and stood right over me when I was bending down. It was his fault.

DAD

And it's not my fault if I'm driving down the street and someone runs out in front of my car and gets hit. But I still say I'm sorry.

LUCY

Why?

DAD

(Raising voice.)

Because there is a person in pain! And I have been the *occasion*—if not the *cause*—of that pain.

LUCY

That person shouldn't have run out in front of your car.

DAD

Yes, but—

LUCY

That person should be the one apologizing.

DAD

(Louder still.)

That person is lying on the ground bleeding!

LUCY

And they probably put a dent in your car.

DAD

(Losing control.)

Don't you have a shred of human sympathy?!

LUCY

Joey's not bleeding.

DAD

(Screaming.)

Listen to me, you creepy, heartless little monster! *YOU* will be the one bleeding if you don't get your sociopathic butt in there and apologize by the time I count to three. One...two...

LUCY

Okay, okay, I'm going. But you'll be sorry on Thursday night.

(LUCY exits. DAD collapses in frustration. Lights down. Sound of bouncing ball resumes and segues into tennis match.)

Scene 4: Wii Tennis Match

Music fades as lights come up on NICKY and NAT playing Wii tennis.

NAT

I'm sorry.

NICKY

Not enough.

NAT

What do you want?

NICKY

For you to be *heartily* sorry.

NAT

What does that mean?

NICKY

Sorry with your heart.

NAT

As opposed to...?

NICKY

With your head.

NAT

What's the difference?

NICKY

Sorry with your head means you know you *ought* to be sorry and so you're *saying* you're sorry.

NAT

That's not fair.

NICKY

Sorry with your heart means you really do *feel* sorry.

NAT

Why does it matter as long as I apologize?

NICKY

Because I can't forgive you unless you *feel* sorry.

NAT

Sure you can. You can make yourself forgive me just like I made myself apologize. It's an act of will. Nothing to do with feelings.

NICKY

But your apology isn't genuine—

NAT

It *is* genuine.

NICKY

If you were *heartily* sorry, you would be less likely to do it again.

NAT

Why?

NICKY

Because true motivation—compelling motivation—comes from the heart.

NAT

Or the gut. Or the hormones. Or the pocketbook. Or the Damage Control Office.

(They stop playing.)

NICKY

Do you believe that?

NAT

Not a matter of faith. Look around.

NICKY

I don't care about "around."

(Pointing to the two of them.)

I care about *here*.

NAT

Here is part of around.

NICKY

But around doesn't determine here. All the heres are what shape the around. Around begins with here.

NAT

There's just as much human nature in here as in around.

NICKY

But there could be a little more heartfelt resolve, that's what I'm saying.

NAT

Be morally superior to what's *around*?

NICKY

Try harder.

(They resume playing.)

NAT

Pride is a dangerous thing.

NICKY

So is sloth.

NAT

You could try harder—to forgive me.

NICKY

I might. If *you* would try harder to repent.

(Lights down.)

Scene 5: Last Two Minutes

Sound of phone ringing. Tight light comes up on PEC holding a cell phone to his ear. Ringing continues. Then, tight light comes up on GRACE who takes out cell phone and holds it to ear.

Hello.

GRACE

It's me.

PEC

(Cautious.)
What do you want?

GRACE

My plane's going down!

PEC

What?

GRACE

The engine's on fire.

PEC

Really?

GRACE

Smoke everywhere.

PEC

What are you—?

GRACE

We're losing altitude.

PEC

How long—?

GRACE

I don't know. A couple minutes maybe.

PEC

And this is...?

GRACE

PEC
 This is what I want to do with...my last minutes.

GRACE
 Why me?

PEC
 I love you. *(Beat.)*

GRACE
 Sure. *(Sarcastic.)*

PEC
 I do.

GRACE
 What about...the others?

PEC
 Please don't. Not now. *(Begging.)*

GRACE
 Well, what do you *expect* me to say?

PEC
 Nothing. ...I'm sorry.

GRACE
 It's too late for that.

PEC
 I was...I was hoping it isn't. I was hoping you could...forgive me.

GRACE
 That's asking a lot.

PEC
 You were always the one. *(Ignoring this.)*

GRACE
 Then why...?

PEC
 Because I was stupid. Adolescent. Selfish.

Go on. GRACE

But I always...through it all...I always *appreciated* you. PEC

Right. *(Sarcastic.)* GRACE

I mean it. I did. I always...knew your worth. I never doubted for a moment that you were a better person. PEC

Better than the others? GRACE

And me. PEC

But that wasn't enough. GRACE

It should have been. I know. And I should have behaved differently. PEC

What's next? Aren't you going to say you *would* behave differently if only we could start over? GRACE

Not much point in that now, is there? PEC

I...I guess not. GRACE

So? Can you? PEC

What? GRACE

Forgive me. PEC

Damn it! This isn't fair! *(Beat.)* GRACE

PEC

I'm sorry. I didn't...create this situation.

GRACE

How do I know that? How do I know you're not making up this whole two-minutes-to-live scenario? It's just the sort of perverted thing you'd do.

PEC

You just have to trust me...one last time.

GRACE

No I don't.

PEC

Yes. You do. Because...because you *are* a good person. And good people forgive.

GRACE

And forgive and forgive and forgive until they're suckers and losers and clowns.

PEC

Please. I just need to hear you say it.

GRACE

Why? What difference will it make if you've only got—

PEC

Yes, yes, I've only got—that's the point! That's why I need it...why I called. PLEASE!

(Lights out on PEC.)

GRACE

(Pause. Deep breath.)

I...I forgive you, But only if you're really dying.

(Beat.)

Did you hear me?

(Beat.)

Hello! ... Hello!

(Lights down on GRACE.)

Scene 6: Concentration Camp

Sound of marching boots. Sound fades as lights come up on EZRA and SOL (more weakly) miming digging. For his lethargy, SOL is struck in the face by an unseen hand. Then they both watch the unseen striker move along.

EZRA

How can you do it?

SOL

This day may be my last. I do not wish to waste it on hatred.

EZRA

But think what they've done to us.

SOL

I do. And wonder how they will live with it.

EZRA

But unlike us, they *will live*. And see their children's children.

SOL

Perhaps.

EZRA

They're not like us. They're less than human.

SOL

Or too human.

EZRA

What?

SOL

They have an excess of fear. Like us, they live in fear of suffering, loss, death.

EZRA

But they're the ones who inflict it.

SOL

Knowing it would be inflicted on them if they did not.

EZRA

What kind of man doesn't refuse an order to kill children?

SOL

One who fears that refusing will cost him his own children.

EZRA

Are you saying they have no choice? One man with a conscience could inspire others. If enough refused, couldn't the slaughter be stopped?

SOL

A lot hangs on that "if."

EZRA

Why do you make excuses for these murderers?

SOL

I am not making excuses. I am making peace. With my own dying.

EZRA

And what about him at the top? The one who gives the orders. Surely you can hate him.

SOL

I do not know him.

EZRA

Someone must be responsible!

SOL

Yes. But my hatred would only ravage me without bringing him to justice. That must be left to others now.

EZRA

You're counting on others to hate him?

SOL

I am counting on others to bring him to justice.

EZRA

And you have faith that will happen?

SOL

I have...hope.

EZRA

Why?

SOL

Because despair is...too painful.

EZRA

And what of him above the top—what of him over all?

SOL

I do not know him either.

EZRA

Can you forgive him—for abandoning us? What have we done to deserve this death?

SOL

What did we do to deserve life?

EZRA

What kind of life is this? Wasted with hard labor, wracked with hunger and sickness, our clinging children stripped from us like a layer of flesh, leaving gaping wounds, their last cries for help like daggers in our ears.

SOL

(Blocking ears with hands.)

Why are you doing this? Why can't you leave me to find my peace?

EZRA

Because I despise you! I detest your cowardice. I loathe your smugness, your softness, your passive, weak willingness to forgive.

(Breaking down.)

I hate you for having a soul when I no longer do! I hate you for...being what I can't be... I hate you!

(Falls to knees, sobbing.)

I hate...hate...

(Crying uncontrollably.)

Help...help me...please....

(Beat. Then SOL comforts EZRA. Lights.)

Scene 7: Wrestling Match

Music fades as lights come up on NICKY and NAT wrestling.

NICKY
I'm sorry. I'm sorry I behaved so badly.

NAT
I'm sorry too.

NICKY
For what?

NAT
That you behaved so badly.

NICKY
Hmph.... What about you?

NAT
What about me?

NICKY
You behaved badly too.

NAT
Is this an apology or an accusation?

NICKY
I was hoping for...a joint apology.

NAT
So...your apology is conditional. You're only sorry if I'm sorry.

NICKY
No, no, no. My sorrow is unconditional.

NAT
Good.

NICKY
I just thought that my...being in a sorrowful mood...might inspire a similar affect in you.

NAT
“Affect”?

NICKY

Emotion. I was hoping my apology would...*arouse*...similar sentiments of contrition.

NAT

So this...

(Indicating this exchange.)

is like penitential foreplay?

(NICKY shoots NAT a look of frustration.)

What?

NICKY

There it is again.

NAT

My stunning wit?

NICKY

Your wall of mockery. You could choose not to put it up, you know.

NAT

Will I be billed for this session?

NICKY

Forget it.

(NICKY disengages.)

NAT

But we haven't got to the passionate rending of garments, the sizzling *mea culpas*, the sweaty sackcloth sheets.

NICKY

I said forget it.

(NICKY starts to leave.)

NAT

(Sincerely.)

Don't go away.

NICKY

Why stay? I can't get in.

NAT

What do you mean?

NICKY

(Gesturing.)

The wall.

(Beat.)

NAT

I'm sorry.

NICKY

I'm trying.

NAT

I know.

NICKY

It's hard.

NAT

I'm sorry.

(Lights. Music.)

Scene 8: Friends' End

Music fades. Lights up on BARB and JUDY.

BARB

I don't want to be friends any more.

JUDY

Just because of what I...because of what happened with Gerry?

BARB

Yes.

JUDY

But I was only...I had her best interests at heart.

BARB

(Sarcastic.)

Sure.

JUDY

She knows that.

BARB

She felt hurt and betrayed.

JUDY

What makes you think so?

BARB

She told me. She told me what you did. You who are supposed to be her friend and supporter. And she told me how abandoned she felt.

JUDY

But...things worked out for the best.

BARB

Did they?

JUDY

Don't you think so?

BARB

If they did, it's no thanks to you.

JUDY

Gerry still wants to be friends with me.

BARB

Gerry doesn't have the guts to hold a grudge.

JUDY

So you'll hold it for both of you.

BARB

Damn right.

JUDY

Do you hear how stupid that sounds?

BARB

(Beat.)

I can't help how I feel.

JUDY

Maybe you'd feel different if you'd let me explain.

BARB

What's to explain? You let her hang out to dry. Just when she most needed her loyal friends to stand by her, you actually encouraged her to cave in.

JUDY

I encouraged her to do what I thought was best for her.

BARB

And, not coincidentally, what would make life easiest for *you*. If she caved in, *you* wouldn't have to take a stand.

JUDY

Is that what this is about?

BARB

What else?

(Beat.)

JUDY

Tell me something. Do you have any friends who are Republicans?

BARB

I don't even have friends who are *smokers*.

JUDY

So you never have an argument with anyone who disagrees with you politically.

BARB

Sure. I have *relatives* for that.

JUDY

How does this playing God routine work? You get to line everybody up and decide who's good and who's bad? Sheep and goats?

BARB

Not my call who's good and bad. Only my call who I want to be friends with.

JUDY

And you don't want to be friends with anyone who doesn't think exactly like you.

BARB

On some issues.

JUDY

And this is one of them.

BARB

Yep.

JUDY

What if I still want to be friends with you?

BARB

Takes two to make a friendship—but only one to break it.

JUDY

And you think I'm the one who's breaking it.

BARB

You made your choice. Now I'm making mine.

JUDY

And it doesn't matter...what we've shared in the past...our history.

BARB

I didn't say that.... It isn't that I don't...grieve for the loss.

JUDY

Then don't lose it!

BARB

It's already gone.

JUDY

What has?

BARB

You. My idea of who you were. The person I was once friends with.

JUDY

So when you weigh all the good experiences we've shared, all the things we agree on, against this one act—

BARB

This one act of critical cowardice.

JUDY

—you find me wanting. And deserving of...being cast off.

BARB

Look. It's not like I have the power to condemn you to hell. And I wouldn't if I did. I don't wish you any harm. I hope you have a long and happy life. I just don't have any interest in being a part of it.

(Beat.)

JUDY

It makes me very sad.

BARB

Me too.

(Lights. Music.)

Scene 9: Prison Visit

Metallic sound of prison door closing. Lights up on NOZ, an inmate sitting at a small table. BESSIE enters and sits opposite him.

I forgive you. BESSIE

You're lying. NOZ

No. It's the truth. BESSIE

Did the chaplain ask you to come here? NOZ

Yes, but— BESSIE

So you don't really mean it. NOZ

I do. BESSIE

What I did to your...was...something a mother couldn't forgive. I don't believe you. NOZ

That's your business. BESSIE

It just doesn't seem possible...unless you secretly wanted.... How can you do it? NOZ

That's my business. BESSIE

(*Sarcastic.*) NOZ

Is it because you believe "God" forgives me? BESSIE

That's God's business. NOZ

Can you possibly think I deserve it?

(BESSIE gives him a shriveling look.)

NOZ *(Cont.)*

Then why? Is it because you want to be a good person?

BESSIE

I am a good person. I was a good person long before you...did what you did.

NOZ

So was I.

(Gets another look.)

I was. Sometimes. Nobody's good all the time. Not even you. Right?

BESSIE

(Coolly.)

Right.

NOZ

There was a time when good people took an eye for an eye.

BESSIE

Attitudes evolve.

NOZ

Not all evolution is good, is it?

(Sarcastic.)

Monkeys to men, for example.

(Beat.)

Is that why you forgive me? Get the monkey off your back?

BESSIE

My back?

NOZ

I thought I took care of that for you.

BESSIE

You did nothing for me.

NOZ

Oh, I don't expect you to be grateful right away. Lawyers, reporters, do-goody neighbors... all in your face now. No time to think. But down the road you'll see.

BESSIE

What will I see?

NOZ

That your life is better...without the shame. Don't have to be embarrassed... always needing to explain the misfit, the pansy transy in the headlines, the nasty gene. All that goddamn

NOZ (*Cont.*)

self-righteous rebellion...the betrayal of everything you stand for. You know I only did what you secretly wanted somebody to do...maybe even what you wished you had the conscience-free guts to do yourself.

BESSIE

You're wrong.

NOZ

You *were* ashamed.

BESSIE

Yes. I was...I was ashamed of him.

NOZ

Well?

BESSIE

And proud. Just like you are bad. And good.

NOZ

Why proud?

BESSIE

My boy was bright, hardworking. He was generous and caring.

NOZ

So why then? Why forgive me?

BESSIE

I can't live with the burden.

NOZ

What burden?

BESSIE

The anger and hatred and resentment.

NOZ

But I...*relieved* you of those feelings for him.

BESSIE

You just *transferred* them. The anger and resentment I once felt for him I now feel for you—and for myself. But I can't carry all of it. So I'm letting yours go.

NOZ

So...for you...there's no relief?

A life sentence.

BESSIE

NOZ
What am I supposed to do with your fucking forgiveness?

BESSIE
I don't care.

NOZ
And what about forgiving yourself?

BESSIE
(Gets up.)
I don't care about that either.

(Silence, as she walks away.)

NOZ
Hey—
(She turns back. He struggles with a possibility. Then...)
Tell the chaplain to go to hell.

(Their eyes lock for a moment. She exits. Lights.)

Scene 10: Prodigal

*Sound of someone dropping ice cubes into two glasses.
Lights up on a middle-aged couple: CHARLES and
MARGARET having a cocktail.*

CHARLES
What does it mean?

MARGARET
Just that.

CHARLES
Just what? Does it mean you'll forget it ever happened?

MARGARET
Hardly.

CHARLES
That you'll *act as though* it never happened?

MARGARET
Do you think that's possible?

CHARLES
I don't know. That's what I'm asking you.

MARGARET
No. I don't think that's possible.

CHARLES
Then what does it mean?

MARGARET
That I'll try to live with it... To get on with life...in spite of what you did.

CHARLES
And how will you manage that?

MARGARET
That depends on you.

CHARLES
You mean...on my not doing it again.

MARGARET
Oh, that goes without saying. More than that.

More?
 CHARLES

Much more.
 MARGARET

What?
 CHARLES

I don't know. That's for you to figure out.
 MARGARET

So you don't have some "test" in mind.
 CHARLES

Test?
 MARGARET

I guess I've already failed the test, haven't I? And now you're giving me the chance to "re-take" it. Which should be easy because now I know the hard parts, the tricky parts, the parts I have to be especially careful with. But there are always points deducted on a re-take, aren't there? I mean, even if you get everything right, you still can't ever get a perfect score, can you?
 CHARLES

Nobody's perfect.
 MARGARET

But some people are more imperfect than others, aren't they? And some people's imperfections are...more serious than others.... Do you really believe that?
 CHARLES

What?
 MARGARET

That nobody's perfect.
 CHARLES

Of course.
 MARGARET

(Beat.)

How do you suppose the Prodigal Son made out on his re-take?
 CHARLES

In the Bible?
 MARGARET

CHARLES

Yeah. The one who squanders his inheritance on “riotous living.”

MARGARET

And then comes crawling home to Daddy—

CHARLES

Who kills the fatted calf to welcome him.

MARGARET

I always thought that response was...a bit...extreme. Reinforcing bad behavior. You know.... “enabling,” as they say now.

CHARLES

Maybe the father’s just happy to have him back.

MARGARET

I remember having a lot of sympathy for the resentful older brother, the one who’s stayed home, the one who’s been...

(Pointedly.)

faithful.

CHARLES

Maybe it hasn’t been as hard for him. Maybe he’s cut out for...life on the farm.

MARGARET

So do you think the Prodigal will pass the retake?

CHARLES

Probably depends on how his father treats him.

MARGARET

More likely on how he treats his father.

CHARLES

What does the old man say? Something about dying. “This my son was dead—”

MARGARET

“and is returned to life.”

CHARLES

Wow. Pretty dramatic, huh?

MARGARET

Good stories always are.

CHARLES

What do you think makes it possible—that return to life?

MARGARET
The Prodigal ran out of credit cards.

CHARLES
Come on.

MARGARET
It's true.

CHARLES
What else?

MARGARET
I don't know. What else?

CHARLES
He missed his father.

MARGARET
(Sarcastic.)
Life on the farm?

CHARLES
Even that. But most of all he believes...

MARGARET
In his ability to turn over a new leaf?

CHARLES
In his father's faith that he can do it. Without that, he'll never pass the re-take.

(Beat.)

MARGARET
We're not told how the story ends.

CHARLES
No. We have to make it up ourselves, don't we?

(Beat.)

MARGARET
Yes. I guess we do.

(They look at each other. Lights. Music.)

Scene 11: Fencing Match

Music fades as lights come up on NICKY and NAT fencing.

NICKY
I'm sorry.

NAT
What exactly are you sorry for?

NICKY
I'm sorry you feel that way.

NAT
Well *I'm* sorry *you* feel *that* way—your *pseudo* regret.

NICKY
It's not pseudo. It's real. I really do feel regret that you feel that way.

NAT
What kind of half-assed apology is that?

NICKY
It's not half-assed.

NAT
You're right. It's full-assed.

NICKY
If you're going to be...belligerent, there's nothing I can say.

NAT
No psycho-babble for dealing with belligerence? The King/Queen of Conflict Resolution subdued to silence? Call in the cameras!

NICKY
You have a right to your feelings.

NAT
Ah—there it is!

NICKY
Want to talk about them?

NAT
Talking about them is not *feeling* them. You said I have a right to my *feelings*. To *feel* my feelings.

NICKY

Okay.... Okay, what do you feel?

NAT

I feel pissed that you did what you did.

NICKY

You were offended by my behavior.

NAT

Damn right.

NICKY

Why?

NAT

Because your behavior was offensive!

NICKY

I don't feel that way.

NAT

(Stops fencing.)

Then what's the point of apologizing?

NICKY

(Stops fencing.)

I thought it would...help.

NAT

And it *would*—*if* it were real. Give it to me.

NICKY

What?

NAT

That Oxford-dictionary app you carry around to embarrass people.

NICKY

That's not the way to—

NAT

(Gesturing "Gimme.")

No, no...we'll use *your* weapon of choice.

(Exasperated, NICKY hands over the phone. NAT thumbs it.)

Here it is. "Apologize. To acknowledge and express regret for a *fault or injury*."

(Looking up.) It's not "I'm sorry *you*...." It's "I'm sorry *I*...." Get it?

NICKY

(Retrieves phone, thumbs down screen.)

There's a second meaning: "To make a formal defense of a position in speech or writing."

NAT

What?

NICKY

(Pocketing phone.)

As in *Apologia*. *Apologia* of Socrates...Pascal...Newman.

NAT

Now there's a trio that had a lot to be sorry for.

(NICKY smiles. NAT points a "Gotcha.")

Made you smile.

NICKY

You always do.

(They resume fencing.)

NAT

So now I have to listen to your pathetic "*apologia*" for your offensive behavior?

NICKY

No.

NAT

What then?

NICKY

I can be sorry that my behavior offends you even if it doesn't offend me.

NAT

And where does that leave us?

NICKY

It *could* leave us with

(Pointedly.)

Conflict Resolution...if...

NAT

If what?

NICKY

If we mutually accept our differing criteria for offensiveness.

NAT

And if we don't?

NICKY

Then...I guess one of us has to accept the other's criteria...

NAT

And behave accordingly?

NICKY

Yes.

NAT

Or?

NICKY

Live in unresolved conflict.

NAT

So.... How do we decide who does the accepting?

NICKY

The person who is Great-of-Heart and Noble-of-Spirit always does the accommodating.

NAT

Yeah right.

NICKY

Or...

(They drop their foils, approach each other.)

NAT

We could...

(Each raises a fist to eye level. They hold this pose for a moment, then do a round of "Paper, Scissors, Rock.")

NICKY

(Who has won.)

Ah!

NAT

Two out of three.

(They start again. Lights down.)

Scene 12: The Lonely Goatherd

Sound effects: an audience booing. As sound fades, MAGNUS enters in a hurry, disgusted. PRU pursues him, grabs him, roughly turning him around until they face each other.

PRU

What were you *thinking*? Shit! What *were* you thinking?!

MAGNUS

It's true.

PRU

What's true?

MAGNUS

What I said.

PRU

It's true my sister-in-law's got pasta brains, but I don't tell her that.

MAGNUS

Why not?

PRU

Because she outweighs me by a hundred pounds.

MAGNUS

What's that got to do with—?

PRU

You've screwed up real bad here and we've got to think of a way out.

MAGNUS

Out?

PRU

Of the media meltdown. Don't play stupid. We don't have time.

MAGNUS

Well, I'm not apologizing, if that's where you're heading.

PRU

Why not?

MAGNUS

Because what I said is true.

PRU

What you said was insulting. And inflammatory. And NEANDERTHAL!

MAGNUS

Don't give me that politically correct crap.

PRU

You think I care about PC any more than you do? That's not the point.

MAGNUS

What is?

PRU

They care. Your followers. Your fans. Your constituents. Your name-in-the-books, money-in-the-bank, bread-on-the-table, supporters. And—by extension—mine!

MAGNUS

You think this one little—?

PRU

Yes.

MAGNUS

Fickle.

(Beat.)

PRU

Look. You don't have to mean it.

MAGNUS

What?

PRU

The apology.

MAGNUS

I told you I'm not—

PRU

You just say you're sorry if some people were...offended.

MAGNUS

I'm not.

PRU

You're not sorry some people were offended?

MAGNUS

I meant for them to be offended. They deserved to be offended. They were begging to be offended.

PRU

Okay. Fine. But did *you* have to be the one to offend them?

MAGNUS

Everybody else is too scared.

PRU

Oh great. So you've been ordained the Prophet of Reproach.

MAGNUS

I just said what everybody else thinks.

PRU

Right.

MAGNUS

You don't think so?

PRU

No.

MAGNUS

Well then, I just said what everybody else *should* think.

PRU

(Sarcastic.)

Oh, much better. Get a grip. Look it doesn't matter what you think. It only matters what you *say*. And it matters even more what the media people say. So let's just think of what you can *say now* that will sound good in the news. Okay?

MAGNUS

I told you I'm not gonna—

PRU

Yeah, yeah. We'll think of a way to word it so it's not some kind of pansy retraction.

MAGNUS

Some what?

PRU

Taking back.

MAGNUS

I know what retraction means.

PRU

Then what?

Pansy? MAGNUS

What about it? PRU

It...*offends* me. MAGNUS

It does? PRU

Yes. MAGNUS

But I thought you were...straight. PRU

Just because I look...doesn't mean I... MAGNUS

You mean you...? PRU

You never know, do you? MAGNUS

Well...I guess not. PRU

So maybe you should think about...apologizing. MAGNUS

Listen—I...um... PRU
(Beat. They look at each other.)

Gotcha! MAGNUS

We don't have time for cute. Think of an addiction. PRU

What? MAGNUS

Something you can blame, then get rehabbed for. You were drunk, high, low, medicated. PRU

MAGNUS

I wasn't. And I don't want to spend six months in some nowhere halfway house.

PRU

Would you rather spend the rest of your life in the national doghouse?

MAGNUS

What happened to free speech? People should be able to say what they think.

PRU

They can. They just have to be willing to live with the consequences.

MAGNUS

I am. I'm willing.

PRU

Fine. Then say goodbye to your career.

MAGNUS

Goodbye. Not like it was revving up for takeoff.

PRU

Yeah, well.... Wait. Is that what this is about?

MAGNUS

What?

PRU

Jump-starting your grinding engine with a little attention. Because believe me, this is not the kind of attention to get you up off the runway.

MAGNUS

Nah, nah.

PRU

Then what?

MAGNUS

I'm tired of it. I don't want to fly anymore.

PRU

No more Peter Pan?

MAGNUS

Right.

PRU

What will you do instead?

Grow up. MAGNUS

And...? PRU

Get a job where I can say what I think. MAGNUS

And that would be...? PRU

Goatherd? MAGNUS
(Shrugs. Beat. Then.)

Perfect. PRU
(Sarcastic.)

(Music: first couple lines of "Lonely Goatherd." Lights.)

Scene 13: Café Nirvana

A Tibetan gong. It reverberates in the darkness. Then, lights up on TORI laying out yoga mat. After a few seconds, SAM enters, putting on clothing. They are young, brand new in the relationship.

SAM

I...I want to apologize for...last night.

TORI

It doesn't matter. I'm letting it go.

SAM

I don't see how you can. Some of the things I said were...well, pretty hurtful.

TORI

They're gone. Rain on slanted shingles; noise on deaf ears; Roman candles in a sunny sky. They're not registering. Not sticking. Gone.

(TORI gets into a yoga positions. Takes a deep breath.)

Inhale good energy; exhale stress.

(Lets it out. Continues with yoga throughout the rest of the scene as SAM tries to get her attention.)

SAM

Well. Good. I'm glad you can...I'm relieved you're dealing with it in such a healthy....But don't you want to...eh, talk it through?

TORI

No.

SAM

So you're just...you're going to be able to forgive and forget? Without any talking.

TORI

No talking.

SAM

Ever?

TORI

Possibly.

SAM

About *this*, you mean. No talking about *this*. But there will still be talking. Between us. I mean, including you to me.

TORI

Possibly.

SAM

Because I was thinking maybe I should explain *why* I...said some of those things I said.

TORI

Not interested.

SAM

Oh. Well. If it doesn't matter...

TORI

Doesn't matter.

(Beat.)

SAM

What *does* matter?

TORI

Peace of soul.

SAM

Yes, of course. And you...you can get peace of soul without...?

(Gestures back and forth between them.)

TORI

I'm trying.

SAM

And you get that by thinking about last night as...by thinking of me as...?

TORI

Illusion.

SAM

Illusion as in not really here or illusion as in not important?

TORI

Yes.

SAM

I see. So...I'm invisible and unimportant.

(No response.)

Well... I don't want to bother you...

(No response.)

So, you're not thinking at all about last night?

TORI

No.

SAM
But are you thinking at all about me?

TORI
Of course.

SAM
What are you thinking? I mean if it's not too...personal.

TORI
I'm extending *Metta*.

SAM
Metta?

TORI
Loving Kindness.

SAM
Oh. That's good.... Isn't it?

TORI
It gets rid of anger.

SAM
So you admit you're angry with me?

TORI
(Ignoring this.)
Metta encompasses all living beings...
(Pointedly.)
down to the vilest insect.

SAM
I see. Listen, are you sure you wouldn't like to talk about this. I mean you must have some feelings you'd like to express. You probably want to—

TORI
No wants.

SAM
What?

TORI
I'm extinguishing all cravings, desires and attachments.

SAM
You can do that?

TORI
Working on it.

SAM
All?

TORI
That's the goal.

SAM
Wow. That's really...admirable. I guess. So...um...where does that leave us?
(*No response.*)

I mean...no cravings...none. Hmm.... That's something. So what about eating? You'll still eat, won't you?

TORI
A little.

SAM
Because you need food to live. And suicide can't be part of *Metta*, right? Because Loving Kindness encompasses *all* living beings, doesn't it? Even yourself.

TORI
Yes.

SAM
So then...What about... other cravings, for example, say...oh, I don't know...sex?

TORI
You don't need sex to live.

SAM
True. Well, some people don't. But I didn't think...I mean you didn't seem to me to be... one of those people. I mean last night I had the impression you were definitely not one of those people. You're...um...not thinking of...becoming one of those people, are you?

TORI
Possibly.
(*Beat.*)

SAM
With all due respect for your...eh...spiritual life, I'm wondering if I...if we might try a little one-on-one Loving Kindness again before you...accomplish all your goals. Would you consider that?

TORI
(*Takes time exhaling. Then.*)
I might.

SAM

Ah...good. So...so when you're finished here, say around seven tonight, do you think you might meet me for...a very small vegetarian dinner?

TORI

No attachments?

SAM

No, no, of course not.

TORI

Where?

SAM

You pick.

TORI

Place on the corner of Eighth and Grove. It's called—

(They finish the sentence together.)

TORI & SAM

Café Nirvana.

(Lights. Music.)

Scene 14: Wake-up

Sound of an alarm clock going off then being silenced by the snooze button. Lights up on GABBY sitting with an open book. ADAM enters, stands for a moment.)

ADAM

Excuse me.

(GABBY looks up.)

I don't suppose...I guess there's not any chance of my getting in.

GABBY

What makes you think that?

ADAM

Well, popular sentiment has it that—

GABBY

Popular sentiment doesn't count here.

ADAM

Oh? What does?

GABBY

You tell me.

ADAM

How would I know what counts with the powers that be?

GABBY

What counts with you?

ADAM

With me? Let's see.... Following the rules...putting other people first...going to church.

GABBY

That's not true.

ADAM

How do you know?

GABBY

This is no time for games.

ADAM

Okay, okay. Truth. What counts with me? The same thing that counts with everybody else if they'd be honest.

GABBY

What's that?

ADAM

I like people to notice me. I like having my opinions valued, my advice sought after. I like my possessions to be admired for their worth and tastefulness, my body envied for its beauty, my family unrivaled in its health and happiness. I like being richer and more powerful than everyone else so I can afford to be selectively gracious and generous and... stress-free.

GABBY

And *are* you—stress-free?

ADAM

Well, not anymore. Not right this minute.

GABBY

And how did you get all those things you like having?

ADAM

The usual way. Hard work.

(GABBY gives a "Yeah right" look. ADAM gestures "Okay, okay.")

Unscrupulous disregard for honesty and the well-being of others.

GABBY

I see.

ADAM

So. I guess there's no chance of...

GABBY

That depends.

ADAM

On what?

GABBY

On whether you repent.

ADAM

Now? Well of course I repent *now*. Who wouldn't? What's to lose?

(Beat. ADAM waits for GABBY to speak, but there is no response.)

What do you mean by "repent"?

GABBY

Have remorse. Reproach yourself for your bad behavior—

ADAM

Oh I *do*, I *do*.

GABBY

(Ignoring interruption.)

—so much that you would do anything to make up for the damage it caused.

ADAM

Oh. How would I do that?

GABBY

I don't know. What would you suggest?

ADAM

Um...well...some people think...suffering...punishment.

GABBY

Yes, some do choose that.

ADAM

So...how long would I have to suffer?

GABBY

Depends.

ADAM

Hmm.... And others choose...?

GABBY

Other ways.

ADAM

Like what?

GABBY

What do you propose?

ADAM

Well, the problem is I don't really have...remorse.

GABBY

Oh?

ADAM

You see, the "others whose well-being I disregarded" were weak or stupid or lazy.

GABBY

How do you know?

ADAM

Because they would have behaved differently if they weren't.

GABBY

You're sure?

ADAM

Far as I could see.

GABBY

Ah!

ADAM

Ah what?

GABBY

What if you weren't an observer? What if, instead of *seeing* them, you could *be* one of them?

ADAM

What? Now? You mean like reincarnation?

GABBY

Some do choose that way?

ADAM

Won't work. How can I feel remorse for what I've done if I go back as someone that isn't the "I" who needs to develop remorse?

GABBY

What then?

ADAM

I need to go back as me.

GABBY

How will that work—given your...attitude?

ADAM

Take it away from me.

GABBY

What?

ADAM

All of it. Take away the money, the status, the power. My home, my health. Everything. But leave my mind intact.

GABBY

Like Job.

Who?
ADAM

Never mind. Why?
GABBY

So I can understand...what it's like to be...one of them.
ADAM

Are you sure?
GABBY

Yes.
ADAM

Seems like...an extreme change of heart.
GABBY

Desperate situations require extreme measures.
ADAM

Maybe...there's...another way.
GABBY

What?
ADAM

Go back as you. But change.
GABBY

Is it possible?
ADAM

Find out.
GABBY

That doesn't seem fair. I mean it's not hard enough.
ADAM

You don't think so?
GABBY

And anyway, what about the people I've already screwed. I can't give back what I've taken from them.
ADAM

Maybe not. But you can give it to others—in their name.
GABBY

ADAM
And that counts?

GABBY
It's the only thing that does.

ADAM
And then...after that...I'll be able to...get in?

GABBY
Maybe after that...you'll *be* in.

ADAM
(Starts to leave, turns back.)
I've been wondering...

GABBY
Yes?

ADAM
What's that book you're reading?

GABBY
(Holds up book.)
This? Oh, it's a biography.
(Flips through revealing blank pages at end.)
Yours.

(Lights fade, during which we hear again the sound of alarm clock going off. Then ringing switches to radio.)

RADIO VOICE
This is WQYR saying "Rise and shine, all you sleepyheads. It's time to start another day!"

End of play.

(Music for curtain call: Edith Piaf singing "Non! Je ne regrette rien.")