

SHORT STORY NIGHT



Author of the novel *The Ask*, Sam Lipsyte's fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Slate*, *McSweeney's*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The Washington Post*, *Playboy*, and many other magazines!

Virtual Interview!!!

Sam Lipsyte

“My Apology”

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My Apology

 [newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/my-apology](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/my-apology)

By Sam Lipsyte

June 24, 2021

My apology, Leffler informs me, is tone-deaf and insufficient.

“But that’s O.K.,” Beekman says. “There is still time to revise.”

“But not much time,” Leffler says. “It’s too late to get out in front. But you can still come abreast.”

“But, of course, there are better ways to say that nowadays,” Beekman says to Leffler.

“But of course, but of course,” Leffler says.

Is there ever laughter in an office that isn’t at least a little nervous?

“So,” I say, “as you are both my bosses, not to mention my mentors, do you have any tips on how to best approach this apology revision?”

“Be less tone-deaf,” Beekman says.

“Be more sufficient,” Leffler adds.

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I spend the evening on my apology.

Near midnight, my daughter leans into the kitchen.

“Still up?” she says.

“Yes. Just catching up on stuff.”

Sophie glides in, takes a seat at the table. “What are you working on?” she says.

“Oh, nothing important.”

“You always used to tell me about your job.”

“You were always asking. I guess you had a boring life back then.”

“Dad . . .”

“Just kidding. But you’re a teen-ager now. So much going on at school, with your friends. . . . I can’t imagine my work could be that interesting to you.”

"It's not," Sophie says. "But your apology sure is."

"Mom tell you?"

We're divorced, Melissa and I, but we still talk, at least about Sophie, or things related to Sophie. We keep each other in a cold loop.

"What are you going to do?" Sophie asks, and with her new acrylic fingernail scoops out a sliver of banana bread from the still cooling pan, pops it in her mouth. Whenever we have bananas that are about to turn, and I feel especially vexed, I bake a loaf.

"Well," I say. "I'm going to apologize. Don't really have much choice."

"Aren't you sorry for what you did?"

Sophie has recently dyed her hair its original color. It's disconcerting.

"I'm sorry people were offended," I say.

"Isn't that a cop-out?"

"Is it?"

"I don't know," Sophie says. "Can I borrow twenty dollars against my allowance?"

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Beekman says the new draft shows promise.

Less deaf. More depth.

"Still," Leffler says. "It's missing something crucial."

"What is it missing?"

"That crucial element known as remorse."

"Believe me," I say. "I'm full of remorse."

"Maybe," Beekman says. "But it's not coming through in the apology. Do you understand that what you did was wrong?"

"To be honest," I say, "not completely."

"Not completely, he says," Leffler says.

"At least he's being honest," Beekman says.

“Look,” I say. “I can understand how, if one does not have all the facts, or a sense of the context, one might perceive—”

“So this is it?” Leffler says.

“This is what?” I say.

“The hill,” Beekman says.

“What hill?”

“The mound, or monticule, upon which you yearn to greet your demise.”

“There’s no hill,” I say. “There is just a misunderstanding.”

“Very well, then,” Leffler says. “I would suggest a complete overhaul. Apology two point oh. There is still time, I think.”

“But not much,” Beekman says. “It’s already too late to come abrea— to come to the side of it. But we can still maybe take this thing from behind.”

“Beekman,” Leffler says.

“I mean catch it. That’s all. Before it’s completely out of the barn. Before we’re sitting here trying to put the horse poop back in the toothpaste tube. And you’re dead on your hill.”

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I get cracking on my newest version, try to craft something a bit more remorse-centric.

Marco, my ex-brother-in-law, who is also a lawyer, calls.

“Melissa filled me in,” he says. “I hope you’re not apologizing.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Big mistake. The worst thing you can do is apologize.”

“How can that be?”

“Because it will never be enough,” Marco says. “And it won’t change the outcome, either. They’ve already made up their minds about you, trust me. It’s just assets and liabilities. The morality stuff is a smoke screen. Maybe they feel they’re paying you too much. Maybe you’re not as productive as you used to be. Here’s a chance for them to make a change. And they can look good while still earning their profits. Nothing important has been altered to make the

lives of ordinary people better. But your bosses can keep coasting along, the pigs. Meanwhile, if you apologize, you'll get nothing from them in court, down the line, because you will have already admitted you did something wrong."

"But I just want to tell my side of the story."

"There are no sides of a story," Marco says. "There are just different stories. People either believe yours or the other one. Usually the other one."

"So, what should I do?"

"Got any bananas?"

"You know me well," I say.

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Thing is, I am sorry and I am also not sorry. It's all so nuanced. The nuance itself is highly nuanced.

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Melissa calls to tell me that some of Sophie's classmates have teased and bullied her.

"Because of me?"

"No, but it could have been. Next time it could be. Look, I know my brother encouraged you to do otherwise, but can't you just get this over with? Move on?"

"Move on to where?"

"To wherever people like you go after these sorts of things."

"I don't want to move on! I want to stay on!"

"Then I guess you'd better do what they're asking."

"I'm trying," I say. "It's just not always clear what that is, precisely."

"Figure it out. For your daughter's sake."

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Beekman and Leffler have given me the remainder of the week to refine my apology.

The problem now is all one of nuance. From a certain distance, the nuance is complex, but coherent. Close up, it splinters into myriad fragments of subtle distinction.

The events themselves—the words, the acts, the intent—are a blur, a frantic smear. A certain phrase, once quite common and, by my lights, benign, was uttered, I admit, by me. Its lesser-known and brutal associations, to which I was not privy at the time, choked the office like a poison gas.

Currents of history pushed this gas, herded it, prevented it from dissipating or exiting through vents. My history seeped into that of the offended party, which collided with the history we'd all been taught in school, as well as the revision of *that* history we knowing people knew, as well as the revision of that revised history, which had recently gusted in with the force of a reckoning.

Also, it should be noted with appropriate candor that after I uttered the aforementioned phrase and suffered an onslaught of verbal abuse from my co-workers—no doubt unmooring me from my usual sense of decorum—I did, in fact, in plain view of all, urinate on my offended colleague's desk.

That part was wrong (though I guess I can thank stage fright and my middle-aged prostate for the fact that hardly more than a trickle was produced), and I am deeply, hauntingly remorseful, especially since the colleague, a recent addition to our team, had become something of a protégé to me.

Probably anybody else would have been fired on the spot. Or been taken into custody. End of story. Or stories. But with me there are mitigating circumstances. That's what maybe seems to shock my colleagues the most: I opened my fly and made water on my mentee's desk after uttering a phrase that I still insist wasn't always noxious but must have turned so, like a banana, at some point in the recent past, and yet I remain, at least nominally, here at the Beekman/Leffler Group, formerly known, back when Oates was with us, as the Beekman/Leffler/Oates Group, or, to industry insiders, *BLO*.

But my colleagues are not aware of another history, one I share with Beekman and Leffler.

I was one of their first hires, after all.

I know where the bodies are buried, metaphorically speaking.

Someday, of course, these bodies—including that of Oates—will turn to dust and it really won't matter where they are buried. But, while these metaphorical corpses remain scraps of flesh and bone and curled fingernails and parched hair, it does matter.

Still, it's clear that I do need to apologize. I'm just not sure why I find it so difficult.

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Doubtless there are reasons—intellectual, philosophical, ethical—why I find it so difficult, but here in my kitchen, with another loaf of banana bread in the oven, and Sophie in her room attacking her schoolyard tormentors with brief, retaliatory videos recorded on her phone, they elude me.

I encouraged Sophie to make the videos, and, as her uncle Marco counselled, to apologize for nothing, despite the fact that her behavior at school has been, according to the latest e-mail from her vice-principal, less than ideal.

“If you apologize,” I told her, “you just make it worse. They’ve already made up their minds.”

“Those stupid gatekeepers,” Sophie said. “I hate them.”

I wasn’t exactly sure to whom she was referring, but I concurred. “I hate them, too,” I said.

“Wait,” Sophie said. “Are we gatekeepers?”

“If we are,” I said, “it’s a tiny gate, way off on the edge. It’s not a gate that opens to much.”

“Cool.”

Perhaps the main reason I find it difficult to compose what I’d have to call my apology five point oh or maybe six point oh is the absence of . . . what’s the word I’m looking for?

Reciprocation, maybe?

By which I mean, who the fuck has ever fucking apologized to me?

Did my father apologize for deserting us when I was seven?

Did my mother apologize for subsequently marrying Cleon Teitelbaum, M.D.?

Did Coach Castellano apologize for cutting me from the varsity bowling squad?

Did Professor MacInnes ever apologize for falsely accusing me of plagiarism in my final paper for Medieval Thought and Belief, and thereby causing the university to rescind my scholarship? (She did, sort of, on her deathbed, much too late.)

What about Eddie Kim, my roommate, who slept with Violetta Mendoza while I was home on Christmas break?

What about Violetta, who, before she slept with Eddie, promised me that she would never sleep with Eddie?

What about Aunt Dolly, who refused to pay me—a broke kid who’d dropped out of college after he lost his scholarship—for painting her goddam house while she lay on a beach in Barbados? She said that I’d eaten up my fee with the lavish lunches and dinners I charged to

her account at the gourmet delicatessen. Tell me, precisely how many smoked-salmon-and-caviar platters (never beluga, by the way) and filet-mignon hoagies equal a professional-grade sanding, assiduous application of primer, and two beautiful coats of semi-gloss paint on a rambling Victorian plus detached garage? Not so easy to deduce, is it? Maybe it's more complicated than some loathsome burst of snap self-righteousness can adjudicate.

What about Melissa, my ex, who, if you are one of those people who hold the decidedly not medieval but more modern belief that opening one's fly and micturating on an already offended colleague's desk might be a sign of sickness, long ago forsook her vow to have and to hold me in sickness as in health, seeing how it's not the first time my behavior has hinted at unwellness, at least according to the confusing—and ever-shifting—mores of our times?

I mean, what about Melissa? Was it not she who actually uttered the words “you are a sick piece of shit who needs serious help,” after that contretemps with the unquestionably sight-challenged Uber driver? (Nota bene: Melissa never even clocked the amused grin on the driver's face after I said, “Does your mother have any children who don't suffer from severe visual-spatial impairments, or did they all get crushed to death pushing you and your worthless garbage life out of the way of oncoming traffic?” *He* got it.) If I was indeed so sick, why didn't she continue to at least have, if not actually hold, me, as sworn before a majority-her-friends-and-family gathering?

Did my so-called life partner ever apologize for exiting my life?

Point is, I don't need her to apologize. I don't need anyone to apologize. Not even my mother, who, when I was eleven, took Cleon's side after he stumbled, plastered, into my room after midnight, shook me awake, and chewed me out for basically existing, as well as for stealing and breaking his brand-new transistor TV. Cleon's spittle flew everywhere, and he proceeded to open his fly and urinate all over little old me and my Luke Skywalker sheets.

“When you mishandle my electronics,” he bellowed, “you piss on me. So, back at you, turdball!”

My mother, God bless her, just dragged Cleon out of the room, scrubbed me down, and dried me off. She gave me a nice glass of warm milk and a piece of her famous banana bread. Cleon really loved me, she assured me, and everything would be O.K. And it was O.K., as long as I locked my door and steered clear of my stepfather after, say, 9 *p.m.* Look, it's a tough world. It's no place for some hypersensitive formation of crystallized ice, that's for damn sure. When life hands you lemons, you've got to throw those citrusy yellow bad boys smack back into life's cretinous mug and say, “Keep your lemons, fuckface! I'm making orange juice!” That's what my father taught me before he joined the snake cult, and that's what I plan to impart to my child. This is why I support her campaign of terror against her classmates. It's also why context and nuance matter, now more than ever.

Still, don't get me wrong: I get it. I realize this is, as Beekman put it, a culminating incident, if not a hinge moment or inflection point, and it's certainly not the first time I have caused harm in the workspace. But you'll just have to trust that I really do understand, at this juncture, that there is no ironic way to throw an Aryan Brotherhood gang sign in the break nook. I also know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Jews don't exercise total control over the banking industry. It's not Barclaysstein, after all. Or CitiFarb.

Cleon, of the Hebrew faith himself, barely had enough to retire on, even after years as a Mob doctor who once, my mother told me, did a hip replacement in a sterilized shipping container.

I want to do better. I have to do better.

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Beekman stares at me before speaking.

"Snake cult?"

"I can elaborate on that if you like."

"Maybe not," Leffler says. "Although the shipping-container story is interesting."

"What exactly is this supposed to be?" Beekman says, shakes the paper in the air.

"My apology."

"Are you joking?"

"Not really."

"Just say you're joking, admit to us now it's a tone-deaf joke that's nearly as tone-deaf as your initial apology, and we'll give you one more chance."

"But not because you deserve it," Leffler says. "Only because . . . well, because of your longtime service."

"To honor the memory of Oates," Beekman says. "Rest in peace."

"Not that Oates is actually dead," Leffler says.

"Do you have any suggestions for the revision?" I say.

"The part where you say you'll do better," Beekman says. "Keep that. Scrap the rest."

"But you really have to nail it now," Leffler says. "Many here grow restless. It shocks them that we haven't fired you yet. The fact that we control their wages and access to health care is all that prevents total revolt."

“There’s still time,” Beekman says. “If not to actually catch it from behind, to at least signal its unreachability in a manner that’s both perceivable to and emotionally resonant with others.”

“My advice?” Leffler says. “Make it very, very fucking resonant.”

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Marco calls again.

“Yes, I’m still apologizing,” I say.

“This isn’t about that.”

“Oh.”

“Melissa is too upset to make this call, but she thinks it’s best if Sophie stays with her exclusively for a time. Just to be clear, I’m speaking both as Melissa’s brother slash Sophie’s uncle and as someone who always liked you. Somewhat. Or at least found you entertaining, despite yourself. And though I am not speaking as Melissa’s legal counsel, I can say that while Melissa’s not ready to involve the courts, she has serious and, in my view, deeply valid questions about your parenting choices, especially in light of a series of attack videos Sophie has disseminated in her peer community.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I say.

“It’s not a heads-up. It’s an offer.”

“I decline.”

“Did you know I did some work with Krispy Kreme?”

“No,” I say.

“They’re a fine company,” Marco says. “Have done well, obviously. But they once thought they could take on Dunkin’.”

“I’m Krispy Kreme?”

“They readied themselves for a ferocious doughnut war. And, in my humble opinion, they had the superior doughnut product. But do you know what they didn’t understand?”

“That it was really a beverage war?”

“Bingo.”

“I read that article, too, Marco.”

"It's not an article. It's an allegory."

"O.K."

"Also, just between the two of us, I've given it some more thought, and I really think you should apologize. I mean, you exposed yourself and whizzed on somebody's goddam desk."

"Just dribbled on it, really," I say.

"Why is this even a conversation?" Marco says. "Which, full disclosure, is, verbatim, what I just tweeted out."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"I just tweeted out, 'he whizzed on somebody's desk. why is this even a conversation?' With some emojis after it."

"But I thought you said it was between the two of us."

"Wait," Marco says. "What?"

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"Snake cult" was what my mother and Cleon called it—derisively, I am sure.

We are sometimes some of us called away, if only temporarily, to more spiritual pursuits. When I was a kid, the oldest daughter of the family next door, Becky Coldtree, joined a group of neo-Nestorians in Piscataway. Later she earned a big rep in pediatric nephrology. Our journeys are mysteries.

My father's journey is the greatest mystery.

He took me onto his lap before he left us, stroked the back of my neck as you would a kitten.

"Little boy," he said. "My sweet little boy. I wish I could take you with me. But it wouldn't be fair to your mother. Or you. And Meister Herpo would not approve. But remember what I told you about lemons, O.K.?"

"O.K.," I said.

I never heard from him again. I've steered clear of lemons. Oranges, too. I'm a banana man.

Still, I forgive my father.

Will any among you summon the bravery to forgive me? Why must we judge one another by our worst acts? (Well, one might argue, if you murder somebody you should be judged by your worst act, and this I will concede, but leaving a harmless, pale slick on a slab of office

polymer, or voicing a phrase mostly for the felicity of its music, and certainly not with foreknowledge of its very loose association with aspects of our hemisphere's dark past, is not tantamount to murder. Not unless murder itself has been abolished, and much lesser crimes have roared up the ladder of reproach.)

Why not judge me by my better acts? Who remembered that Farooq was allergic to coconut when we ordered his birthday cake? Who covered for Rona when she won tickets to the circus and wanted to take her kids during a working Saturday? Who spent weeks training his newest colleague, showing the proverbial ropes to a person hired by design to be his immediate superior upon completion of said training? Couldn't one even argue that my supposedly hurtful comment, allegedly rendered even more destructive by our power differential, was in fact merely a teasing acknowledgment that this very differential was about to be reversed?

Did I not, at any rate, conduct the training with a smile, or, at the very least, a polite rictus on my face?

And let me reiterate: even if I experienced some modicum of uncertainty about the inappropriateness of my language, I am still profoundly sorry it hurt my colleague's feelings, and my remorse for whipping out Ol' Captain One-Eye, a.k.a. the Worm That Wowed Pittsburgh, and irrigating a team member's work surface is nothing if not Grand Canyonesque. But maybe, just maybe, we should leave off right there. Perhaps now, in fact, is not the time for punishment at all but for kindness, grace, and a company-wide regeneration rooted in our common humanity and shared goals. As for me, I stand here, wiser, humbler, and say to my aggrieved colleagues: I can do better, and I will do better, and I hope all of you smug, hypocritical, witch-hunting weasels calling for my head on a pike will do better, too. ♦