

Audible Originals presents:

Say You're Sorry

Hosted by Lux Alptraum

Episode 3: Ariana Grande Has Sent You A Message

[intro music; electronic, thoughtful crescendo with guitar notes]

Lux Alptraum:

There's this fantasy of the internet as some kind of great equalizer; a place where the boundaries of race, and sex, and class dissolve away and we're all just humans talking to other humans. A place where it's possible to have a moment of intimate, human connection with someone you'd never run into in real life.

And sure, the internet can foster unlikely connections. But the idea that it makes us all equal? I'm not exactly convinced.

I'm Lux Alptraum, and this is *Say You're Sorry*, a show about public apologies. In this episode, we're looking at how apologies can bring people together — and push them further apart.

Last fall, I had the chance to connect with a writer I've been admiring from a distance for a few years. A writer who has experienced the magic and terror of how the internet can connect people — and who even got an apology that nobody was expecting.

Roslyn Talusan:

I'm glad I could live up to expectation.

Lux Alptraum:

Yeah. You're not a dog in a trench coat, which is great.

Roslyn Talusan:

I might be a cat in a trench coat.

Lux Alptraum:

This is Roslyn Talusan, a Filipina-Canadian culture critic who lives in Toronto. Roslyn's beat is pop culture and she takes it very seriously.

Roslyn Talusan:

People have always treated pop culture as something below politics. As, you know... it's like a guilty pleasure kind of thing. And I think that perspective comes from a sexist take on, like, popstars and stuff; seeing popstars as something only girls like or something only kids like.

Lux Alptraum:

For Roslyn, every Top 40 hit is an opportunity to hold up a mirror to society and think deeply about the messages we get every day about race, gender, and most of all, power. And she picked this particular beat for a reason. On a personal level, she loves popstars and pop culture. And part of that love has always involved talking about her favorite stars online.

Roslyn Talusan:

I grew up on the Internet. Tumblr was really formative for me. That came around when I was in, I think, undergrad and stuff. I spent a lot of lectures on Tumblr making Britney Spears GIFs and looking at Lady Gaga theories and stuff like that.

Lux Alptraum:

Roslyn has a long list of beloved stars, many of them women who use their music to process their pain.

Roslyn Talusan:

I'm still a really big fan of Banks. Not Azealia Banks, but Jillian Banks. Her work and seeing her in concert has been a really big emotional thing for me as a survivor of sexual assault.

Lux Alptraum:

But there's one pop diva who Roslyn has a complicated relationship with.

[electronic beats and notes play in the background]

Roslyn Talusan:

Ariana Grande. I can't say her name without the slight disdain in my voice.

Lux Alptraum:

I probably don't have to tell you who Ariana Grande is. Her six albums have sold millions of copies in the US, with most of them going platinum or double platinum. And she's the first artist since The Beatles to simultaneously occupy the top three slots in the Billboard Hot 100. Ariana is one of the most popular singers in the entire world. You've probably gotten one of her songs stuck in your head.

Daric Cottingham:

Ariana Grande is someone that is musically inclined, just naturally. She also is able to mimic so many voices and she's someone that knows that music is her passion and she really just throws herself into her music.

Lux Alptraum:

This is Daric Cottingham, a journalism student at USC Annenberg and an Ariana

superfan. He's loved her since her early days playing Cat Valentine in Nickelodeon's *Victorious*.

Daric Cottingham:

I do feel, like, a sense of empathy when I listen to her music; I can relate to it. And that's why I've been a fan for so long. Like, I can feel feeling when she sings.

Lux Alptraum:

But Daric's love for Ariana isn't just about her talent. For Daric, Ariana is almost like a savior.

Daric Cottingham:

"Be Alright" by Ariana Grande got me through a lot; like, a lot. Especially when I dealt with my own sexual abuse. Music helped me save my life.

Lux Alptraum:

In fact, a lot of the Ariana superfans we talked to told us something like this. That Ariana's music helped them cope with their sexuality, their depression, their mental health issues. Roslyn feels the same way.

Roslyn Talusan:

"Dangerous Woman" made me feel okay falling in love again after experiencing trauma. Her music really helped me through some stuff and I really, really admired her.

[more upbeat electronic music plays]

Lux Alptraum:

And as Ariana began publicly addressing her own mental health issues, Roslyn's appreciation for her increased.

In May of 2017, one of Ariana's concerts was the site of a deadly terrorist attack. Ariana was physically fine, but the trauma scarred her emotionally. Here she is on *Good Morning America* talking about how she nearly gave up doing live shows afterwards.

[clip from [Good Morning America](#)]

Ariana Grande: *I was like, "I can't." I was like, "I'm not putting those costumes on again. I can't sing those songs again."*

Michael Strahan: *You were done.*

Ariana Grande: *I was like, "I can't. I love y'all, I can't do it." I was like, "There's no way."*

Roslyn Talusan:

She started talking about PTSD and combating mental health stigma. And I really appreciated that about her. She knew what trauma was. She experienced it. She was working through it. And I admired her for, kind of, moving through that so publicly, for being so strong.

[music]

Lux Alptraum:

But over time, Roslyn's feelings for Ariana got more fraught. Roslyn says that Ariana started adopting a new style and persona. She first noticed it in photos.

Roslyn Talusan:

There are images of her being super pale in, like, 2015. And then all of a sudden when she's next to Nicki Minaj, she's darker than Nicki Minaj, who is a Black woman.

Lux Alptraum:

And it wasn't like Ariana had spent a long weekend at the beach. Her clothing and hairstyle changed too, in ways that seemed to mimic Black women's aesthetics. People started using the word 'blackfishing'; basically, changing her style to make people think she might be Black. And it didn't help when Ariana started peppering her speech with Black rhythms and slang.

And Roslyn wasn't the only one noticing this. YouTubers and commentators started calling it out too. Here's Perez Hilton.

[clip from Perez Hilton's [YouTube channel](#)] "Her speaking voice has continued to evolve to the point where a lot of people are accusing Arianna of having a 'blaccent'. That is the terminology out there. That is the terminology that she is being accused of. And I've seen a lot of debate about this, whether she does have a blaccent or not. Other people arguing that she just sounds 'hood' and you can be 'hood' without being of a certain race."

Lux Alptraum:

Ariana Grande is Italian. But what Roslyn and these other commentators were noticing is that she has a tendency to muddy the waters around that identity. She tans her skin. She wears hair extensions. She alters her speech. And on top of, or maybe even *because* of all that, a lot of people think her very Italian last name sounds like the name of a Latina.

For Roslyn, the most memorable instance of Ariana's overstepping came in January 2019 when Ariana got a tattoo on her palm to celebrate the release of one of her

singles. The tattoo was supposed to say “7 Rings” in Japanese characters, but Ariana ended up with a tattoo that actually said “small barbecue grill.”

At this point, Roslyn still admired Ariana, but that admiration came with an asterisk.

Roslyn Talusan:

She’s clearly marginalized in her own ways. She’s obviously been a target of misogyny. And I empathize with her a lot about that. But the problem with her is that, instead of doing anything to dismantle those systems, she’s just kind of like, “Well, I’m at the top of the game, so I’m going to enjoy it.”

Lux Alptraum:

And then, a few months later, Roslyn’s opinion of Ariana took a nosedive.

The story starts in Calgary, Alberta. Roslyn was getting off a red-eye flight.

[music]

Roslyn Talusan:

So, I was super grumpy already. I’m not a morning person at all. And I also really don’t like flying, so, super grumpy.

I just picked up my phone, I checked my notifications, and I saw a couple of push notifications from Twitter from Ariana Grande.

Lux Alptraum:

I just want to pause here and be clear about what that means. Despite all the conflicted feelings she might have about her, Roslyn still got alerts every time Ariana tweeted.

And this tweet read:

“people are so lost. one day everybody that works at all them blogs will realize how unfulfilled they are and purposeless what they’re doing is and hopefully shift their focus elsewhere. that’s gonna be a beautiful ass day for them! i can’t wait for them to feel lit inside.”

Roslyn Talusan:

My favorite popstar, who inspired me to get through a lot, a lot, a lot of trauma, with whom I have this, like, really emotional and intimate connection with her music and stuff, is now punching down on the journalism industry, specifically bloggers.

Lux Alptraum:

Ariana’s tweet was a response to entertainment journalists mocking Justin Bieber’s

acne, but Roslyn didn't know that in the moment. All she saw was a wealthy celebrity taking a shot at her very own industry.

Roslyn Talusan:

It kind of was like the straw that broke the camel's back for me.

Lux Alptraum:

So waiting in the cab line outside the airport, Roslyn did the same thing she always did whenever she was feeling frustrated and angry. She pulled out her phone to vent.

[music]

Roslyn Talusan:

Obviously, I took to Twitter to be like, "You realize that we're creators, right?" And in so many words, I was like, "Just because we don't dance or," you know, dance shitty choreo, or sing, or whatever, doesn't mean we're not creators. Like, "Our craft is valid."

Lux Alptraum:

And then she took things up a notch. Maybe a notch more than you would have in this situation. Definitely a notch more than I would have in this situation.

Roslyn Talusan:

I went off calling her a spoiled white girl from Boca and a bitchass buzzard. You know, I was mad.

Lux Alptraum:

Roslyn admits that her tweets were very nasty. In one of them, she tells Ariana to "suck on my balls." But she didn't actually think that Ariana Grande, a mega-famous popstar with over 60 million Twitter followers would ever see them. As far as Roslyn was concerned, she was just venting to her paltry 4,000 followers, most of whom would scroll on by without giving her tweets a second thought.

So she got her frustration off her chest and put her phone away to go about her day; checking in at the hotel, getting settled, showering. And about an hour later she caught a glimpse of her phone, which was blowing up.

[chaotic electronic music with cacophony of notification dings]

Roslyn Talusan:

I realized a bunch of stans had caught on to this. And I was like, "Uh oh."

Lux Alptraum:

That word Roslyn used? Stans? It basically means superfan. The word comes from

mashing up 'stalker' and 'fan', and most people trace it back to an Eminem song of the same name that was released in 2000. Not all fans like the term.

Daric Cottingham:

If we're going off of the original definition where it was, like, an unhealthy obsession, I am definitely a fan that really just really appreciates the music and understands the intention of the music.

Lux Alptraum:

That's Daric Cottingham again. For Daric, Ariana feels like someone he actually knows.

Daric Cottingham:

When you think about it as a friendship, right? Say someone does something to your friend, or your sister, your sibling, or your brother. You do feel protective of them. And because of that musical connection, and they feel so close to them because that music saved their lives, or it just really helped them in a really rough time in life, it's that same kind of mental and emotional response that you would if someone tried to come at your, like, sibling or best friend or something.

Lux Alptraum:

And that intense emotional connection is what separates the fans from the stans.

Kaitlyn Tiffany:

To me, the word 'fan' is sort of... almost meaningless at this point. It's kind of a marketing word. Like, you're a fan of putting oat milk in your latte over something else, like you're a fan of any consumer product that you happen to like, kind of, enjoy. Whereas being a stan is more like an identity that is very active and prompts a whole set of behaviors on the internet, some of them really fun and some of them really scary.

Lux Alptraum:

That's *The Atlantic's* Kaitlyn Tiffany, an internet culture reporter who's writing a book about One Direction's rabid online fandom. Those "really fun" behaviors she mentioned might be things like going to every show or making art that celebrates a singer you adore. But stans can also veer into those "really scary" behaviors she mentioned too; like harassing anyone who dares to critique your favorite celebrity.

Kaitlyn Tiffany:

The way that fans are organized makes it really easy to conduct a coordinated harassment campaign without even explicitly saying, like, "Let's go conduct a coordinated harassment campaign."

Daric Cottingham:

You have this emotional attachment to it and it's so, so powerful and meaningful to you. And so when you then see someone attacking something that's so meaningful to you. You are now the attack dog trying to defend it.

Roslyn Talusan:

I get both sides of stan culture where it's like, "I resonate with these artists. They mean something personal to me. I make that really deep connection with them." But then at the same time, like, there's this toxic side of stan culture it's like, "If you make any mild criticism of her, you're not a real fan and you deserve to kill yourself," and stuff like that. It's so good but it's so bad, you know?

Lux Alptraum:

And in this moment, at her hotel in Calgary, Roslyn is about to come face-to-face with the ugly side of standom.

Soon, a huge wave of stans started flooding Roslyn's Twitter mentions. DMs. Emails. Instagram feed.

[electronic beats music]

And while some of the messages they sent her were on the milder end, like telling her to "stop running her mouth," others got really, really ugly. And just to prepare you for what you're about to hear, they got pretty racist, too.

Roslyn Talusan:

There are these people with her face as their profile picture, or like 'Ariana Grande Stan #125678', saying stuff like "Kill yourself, you're fat, you're ugly. You should be eating your dog." I said I wouldn't repeat any of these, but they are in my head.

Lux Alptraum:

And it wasn't just nasty messages, either. Some stans attempted to dox Roslyn, posting personal information like her home address on Twitter. Though, lucky for Roslyn, the address they found was a home she hadn't lived in for 15 years. Others got ahold of her PayPal info and started sending tiny payments - a few cents here and there - alongside a vicious message.

Roslyn Talusan:

I really wanted to respond to every single one of their messages saying, like, "Well, who are you? Why are you doing this?"

Lux Alptraum:

Now, prior to our conversation, Daric didn't know about Roslyn or her tweets. And I want to be very clear that he is not one of the people who've been tweeting at

Roslyn, and he does not condone the racism or death threats that people have messaged her. But he did have some thoughts on why the stans were being so aggressive.

Daric Cottingham:

Here's the thing. If Miss Roslyn said that to me... I am from Ruston, Louisiana, 318, and if someone ever spoke to me that way, old me would put a finger on your nose, in your face, and check you. [laughs] And I think people forget, these people with platforms and that are celebrities have every right to defend themselves.

You cannot pretend like you did not play a factor or part in the situation when Ariana Grande, one, did not attack you at first. She made a general statement of something that she saw. You didn't even... you weren't even the journalist that was in question about the piece she was referring to, and *then* started cursing and calling her a Boca bitch, and then saying 'suck my balls'. If somebody would have came at me and said that, I'm putting my finger on your nose and I'm finna tell you to listen here.

Lux Alptraum:

And that's what stans do. They treat every nasty comment about their favorite star like a personal attack.

Daric Cottingham:

Ariana Grande is their business. For them, they're on Twitter because they're "Ariana Grande is my business. I'm here to, like, build up the trend and the hype of Ariana Grande. I'm a part of the fandom. We're trying to..." For stans, their stanning is a mission.

Lux Alptraum:

At first, Roslyn thought she could handle the flood of hate.

Roslyn Talusan:

I've been a feminist writer for five years now. Like, I know what this is like. I know what online harassment is. I know what it's like.

Lux Alptraum:

But the volume of harassment quickly started to overwhelm her. And then, mixed in with all the nasty messages that were blowing up her phone, there was one alert that completely took her by surprise.

Roslyn Talusan:

"Ariana Grande has sent you a message." And I was like, "Am I high?"

[music]

Lux Alptraum:

Roslyn was not high. The real, verified Ariana Grande had sent her a DM on Twitter.

Roslyn Talusan:

I saw her name and I was like... I think my brain froze.

Lux Alptraum:

First, Ariana wanted to clarify what she meant with her tweet about bloggers, the one that had pissed Roslyn off in the first place.

"I find your craft extremely valid. I just don't like people bashing or triggering my friends. I'm sure you understand."

Lux Alptraum:

Ariana went on to explain that her tweet was about journalists who make a living off of nasty gossip about celebrities, not critics engaging with the work. She even complimented a story Roslyn had written about Britney Spears and mental health.

"I liked your piece about Britney. It was beautiful and important. Take care."

Lux Alptraum:

Now, this whole situation is already pretty wild. A lot of celebrities just pay someone to manage their social media. And yet here's Ariana, hanging out on Twitter like a nobody? Reading comments about herself and then going out of her way to learn about the people who were writing them?

But Ariana's messages to Roslyn didn't stop there.

"I apologize for not being clear or wording that better. It's not what I meant. I have respect for journalists and bloggers who treat artists as human beings."

Roslyn Talusan:

And I was like, "Oh, my God. She's apologizing to me."

Lux Alptraum:

But Ariana wasn't just messaging Roslyn to apologize. The reason she'd noticed Roslyn in the first place was because of those angry, venting tweets. And Ariana had indeed seen all of them, including the ones where Roslyn had called her a "fucking buzzard," a "spoiled white girl from Boca" who doesn't write her own music, and of course, that bit where Roslyn told Ariana to suck on her balls.

"You tweeted some very hurtful stuff about me."

Roslyn Talusan:

I was like, "Oh, shit. I feel awful." And she's like... I think she's a year younger than

me, so there was also that where I was like, “Oh, I feel compelled to, like, protect this person and make amends.”

Lux Alptraum:

After she gathered her thoughts and caught her breath, Roslyn realized that she owed Ariana an apology back. So she sent her another message.

Roslyn Talusan:

“You’ve been very inspiring to me and helped me heal in my own journey. I’m sorry I worded the things I said the way I did and that I hurt you. I assumed you would never see them. Thanks again for reaching out.”

Lux Alptraum:

At this point, Roslyn tried to stop thinking about the conversation. Ariana must have more important things to be doing than messaging with her, right? But within a few minutes, her phone buzzed yet again with another message.

“Thank you for your apology. I’m just a person trying to feel okay, too. Of course I’d see it, my fans show me everything, LMAO. Nonetheless, I shouldn’t even come on here anymore.”

So far so good, right? Both these women took responsibility for the nasty things they’d said and acknowledged that whatever their original intentions had been, they’d hurt each other, and that was shitty.

And initially, it seemed like things might turn out okay. Especially since the conversation didn’t stop there. All told, Roslyn and Ariana messaged each other for a full thirty minutes, and the conversation involved a lot of bonding over their shared experience with PTSD. Roslyn even recommended a book for Ariana to read, *Trauma and Recovery*, by Dr. Judith Herman.

But while Roslyn and Ariana were patching things up privately, the stans were getting increasingly vicious in their messages to Roslyn. So, she decided to ask Ariana for help.

Roslyn Talusan:

“Maybe reach out to your fans, though. They’re losing their shit.”

Lux Alptraum:

But all Roslyn got back was the text equivalent of a shrug, saying:

“They’re just reacting with similar energy to what they’ve read. Honestly, your tweets were hostile. They’re upset and they’re passionate. I apologize on their behalf because I don’t love that type of behavior from anyone. They know that,

though. I've said that to them a million times. I'm happy we were able to speak too. I'm wishing you the best in all of your endeavors, especially your healing. That shit is hard work."

Lux Alptraum:

Technically, that's an apology. But I probably don't have to tell you that it's not a great one. Even as she was typing the words "I apologize," Ariana was dismissing doxing, and death threats, and racism as nothing more than fans being passionate. Even worse, she was acting like Roslyn asked for it. If you don't take someone's pain seriously or even try to help them out, your apology doesn't really count.

At the time, Roslyn was so overwhelmed that she couldn't quite pinpoint what felt off about this whole exchange.

Roslyn Talusan:

I always knew that there was something sus going on in those DMs, but I couldn't articulate it in a way that was, like, systemic and not just me feeling hurt because, you know, my fav called me hostile.

Lux Alptraum:

But now, looking back on it, she's able to put a name on that uneasy feeling she had while messaging Ariana.

Roslyn Talusan:

There's this pattern where white women will kind of lean into their whiteness and put on this performance of victimhood to, kind of, invoke this angry brown woman stereotype.

Lux Alptraum:

Roslyn had felt like she was punching back at a powerful person who had shit on her profession. But she had punched at a person who wasn't just rich and famous, but who also had an army of dedicated stans ready to take up arms and attack. And Ariana did nothing to stop them.

But still, there was a part of Roslyn that wanted to overlook that. Because in spite of it all, here was Ariana Grande, one of the most successful and popular popstars on the entire planet, offering her an apology.

And because that kind of resolution is so rare, it's tempting to imagine it as a fairy tale, one where Roslyn and Ariana reconcile and the stans cheer for a happy ending. Everybody wins!

Yeah. That's not what happened.

Five days after posting her nasty tweets, Roslyn was still being inundated with harassment, so she [tweeted out a screencap of her apology](#) to Ariana. The stans did not care. “You can’t attack and be mad when someone bite,” responded a user with the evocative handle [fuckoff00279219](#).

Maybe it would have been different if Ariana had publicly posted her acceptance of Roslyn’s apology and told her stans to back off. But even Daric wasn’t convinced that that would have been enough.

Daric Cottingham:

Some stans feel like when things are done to their, like, person that they stan, they also deserve an apology because they feel hurt when it’s done to them as well.

[music]

Lux Alptraum:

And yet, only Roslyn was being held to that punishing standard. No one seemed to think that Ariana owed a personal apology to each and every blogger her tweet might have pissed off.

It’s been two years since Roslyn got an apology from Ariana Grande and she still gets harassed by Ariana’s stans. Sometimes, it’s because she had the nerve to criticize Ariana again. Other times, it’s in response to something nice she said about Ariana. But Roslyn doesn’t even have to say Ariana’s name to set off the stans; they’ll attack her just for tweeting, period.

It probably won’t surprise you to hear that Roslyn is no longer an Ariana stan.

Roslyn Talusan:

I still really do enjoy her music and I still really appreciate her voice. It’s just there’s also that sour layer of, like, “I know who you are now.”

Lux Alptraum:

And even if you’re not Ariana Grande (although, if you are, Hi! Thanks for listening! Please respond to our emails!) I think there’s something instructive about Roslyn’s story.

Something I learned from Nick Smith, the chair of the University of New Hampshire Department of Philosophy, is that apologies are all about power. When you have a lot of it, you have a greater responsibility to apologize well. And when powerful people take that responsibility seriously, they wind up giving up some of their power in the process.

Nick Smith:

What good apologies can do is the person who had all the power and committed the damage kind of just looks the other person, the victim, in the eye as a person of equal moral worth and, symbolically almost, like, kneels before them. Like, “I treated you like you were less than me. And now I bow before you to show that we’re both humans and you’re a person of moral worth.”

Lux Alptraum:

And as Nick points out, that’s not a trivial thing. People do so much terrible stuff to one another — including tweeting “suck on my balls” or sending racist death threats — because they don’t see each other as fully human, as their true equal.

Nick Smith:

When you apologize, you reject that. You reject that dehumanization. You see the victim as a person.

Lux Alptraum:

Despite all the hype, the internet has never managed to be a great equalizer that levels the playing field for everyone. But when they’re done well, apologies can live up to that promise. Ariana can’t control what her fans tweet; they’re not a literal army. But if she’d put aside her hurt feelings and really taken a moment to see Roslyn as another person in pain, she could have temporarily closed the gap between the two of them.

Done properly, an apology can truly upend the social order. And maybe that’s why so many people are reluctant to really do it.

[outro music; uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]

Say You’re Sorry was created by me, Lux Alptraum.

This episode was hosted by me, Lux Alptraum. This episode was written and hosted by Lux Alptraum and produced by Siona Peterous, who is sorry to anyone who has ever had to deal with her pesky habit of losing her keys and wallet.

Editing by Julia Furlan who also read Ariana Grande’s messages in this episode. Sound design and mixing by Ariana Martinez. Our intro music is by Michael Aquino. Episode art by Augusto Zambonato.

Say You’re Sorry is a production of Bucket of Eels. Rose Eveleth is our executive producer. Special thanks this episode to Emma Woolard and Jack Hamilton.