

Audible Originals presents:

Say You're Sorry

Hosted by Lux Alptraum

Episode 9: A Family Affair

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

Lux Alptraum:

Over the course of this series, we've talked about a lot of different apologies delivered by all kinds of people: presidents at podiums, influencers on YouTube, and popstars in the DMs.

Those kinds of apologies are the ones most likely to wind up in headlines. They're the ones that are fun to analyze, and criticize, and take apart. But they're not the ones most of us deal with in our daily lives. The apologies we know best are the smaller, quieter ones — the private conversations that happen between friends and family.

Siona Peterous:

A few months ago, while I was telling my friend Jade about this project, she was like, "Well, I actually got a great life-changing apology from my mom." I was intrigued. Jade is a really open, authentic person, so if she says it's a good apology, then it's probably a good apology. But I was also very skeptical.

It's pretty rare for people to get "life-changing" apologies from family members. In fact, carrying around unresolved family trauma is something I think we all can relate to. I mean, have you seen how much of reality TV is based on family drama?

It's just so rare for any apology, but especially one between a parent and a child, to address a lifetime of tension and frustration that I couldn't help but be skeptical. But the more I learned about Jade's story, the more I became convinced that this was one of those rare gems. An apology that is so transformative that there is a distinct difference between life before the apology and life after it.

Lux Alptraum:

I'm Lux Alptraum.

Siona Peterous:

And I'm Siona Peterous.

Lux Alptraum:

And this is *Say You're Sorry*, a show about public apologies. For our final episode,

we're going to leave behind the celebrities, and fancy schools, and billion-dollar corporations, and take a trip to Stone Mountain, Georgia.

Siona Peterous:

Jade's family is one of those families that's always been really, really close. Like, some might say, weirdly close.

Jade:

They know that I poop all the time. They know that I'm super... like, I'm an over-sharer and everything. We know everything; the ins and outs of each other.

Siona Peterous:

Sure, they had fights. But when things were good, they were really good. And Jade was especially close with her mom. By high school, they were the kind of mother and daughter who were inseparable.

Jade:

We would go to Trader Joe's; we would gossip about people in our lives. We would people watch and make up stories about themselves. We would talk about everything and do everything together.

Siona Peterous:

That close relationship wasn't an accident. It's something that Jade's mom, Brandi, always hoped to have with her daughter.

Brandi:

My mom and I were very close, and so I wanted that relationship with my children, that closeness.

Siona Peterous:

But the thing is, Brandi was still Jade's mom. And she taught her daughter what many adults teach kids, that Jade needed to apologize when her parents told her to. There wasn't room for debate or conversation on that. But it didn't go the other way. Jade could never ask for an apology from her mom.

Brandi:

As parents, we felt that our way was the way and you don't... I don't need to apologize.

Siona Peterous:

But as Jade got older, that one-sided dynamic wasn't just confusing, it was frustrating and even stressful.

Jade:

When things got bad and she didn't like what I had to say, then all of a sudden it's like, "I'm the parent. You're the child. Don't talk to me that way. It's disrespectful. You're my daughter. I'm not your friend." But any other time it would be like, you know, "I love you so much, you're basically my best friend and everything else, and I look to you more than just my daughter," and things like that. It confused me.

Siona Peterous:

One thing that especially upset Jade was that whenever Brandi felt unappreciated or unloved by Jade's dad, her daughter was the one she would complain to.

Jade:

Like, "I'm just so sick of him," and "I don't feel loved," and stuff like that. "I hope that when you get older and you find someone that you love, that they treat you so much better," and things like that.

Siona Peterous:

And hearing that stuff as a kid had a really big impact on Jade.

Jade:

I knew too much about my parents' relationships. I knew too much about my mom's unhappiness and I didn't know what to do about it. I felt, kind of, cornered in. I don't know what to do with this information. I don't know what to do when you talk about how sad you are, and how you feel like you should deserve to be treated and stuff, and how you feel like you're not getting that from my dad. I don't know what to do.

Siona Peterous:

Jade had no idea how to actually get her mom to stop. The few times she'd tried to push back on her mom's oversharing, it led to intense fights. And one of those fights left Jade really shaken up.

Jade:

She was like, "I don't know who you are anymore. How could you say this to me? I understand why mothers don't talk to their daughters." And I'm just like, "What?" That... That broke me. To think that in a moment where I'm trying to enforce a boundary, I'm being blindly threatened that I could lose my relationship with my mom. I chose that day, "Okay, I'm just not going to put up a boundary because I just love my mom that much. I'll do whatever it takes."

Lux Alptraum:

But refusing to set a boundary doesn't magically make everything okay — which quickly became clear. Like most people, Jade and Brandi had a pretty rough 2020, and through the year, Brandi kept seeking support from Jade, pouring more and

more of her distress and anxiety into her daughter. And Jade kept taking her mother's burdens on, no matter how much it hurt.

And then one day, after her mother once again dumped all of this challenging, personal stuff onto her, Jade realized that she had reached her limit. She was angry, she was hurt, she was resentful. Something needed to change.

Jade:

It just made me feel like I was being an emotional landfill for all my mother's problems for this entire year, for nothing. I was left with all these confusing emotions for nothing. We're back to square one.

Lux Alptraum:

It took a few days for Jade to figure out how to talk about it. And pretty soon, Brandi knew something was up. Remember, these are people who knew when the other one was pooping. So she invited Jade to go for a walk in a nearby park where the two of them loved to go hiking.

Jade:

I was really nervous. I only had 24 hours to get my thoughts together, parcel them up, and put them in a nice, pretty package so that this conversation could be reconciled peacefully and that we can put this away.

Siona Peterous:

On the car ride over, Jade practiced what she was going to say. She was determined to get this right, to express her feelings thoughtfully and really be heard. But the minute she sat down next to her mom on the park bench, all her plans went out the window.

[soft music plays with ambient outdoor sounds]

Jade:

I remember my mom saying, "Before we start, before we have this conversation, can I just preface this? I don't want to be belittled. I don't want my feelings to be invalidated. I want us to have a really good conversation." And I just remember looking at her like, "Is she serious?" Before I can even say a word about how I felt, I have to police myself so that I don't offend her? That doesn't make any sense to me. And so, my mom started to say, like, "I just don't want to be..." And I was like, "You just don't want to be disrespected. Is that what you're saying?"

Siona Peterous:

That word, "disrespect," it just set something off inside Jade. She wasn't a child anymore, and she wasn't going to swallow her feelings for her parents forever. In all those years of apologies being forced on her as punishment or as a social

expectation, she'd never really learned how to ask her mom for an apology when she was feeling hurt. So instead of reciting her carefully rehearsed speech, Jade blew up.

[music shifts to more intense]

Jade:

"I can't do this anymore. I don't want to be your best friend. I don't want to be your emotional dump. I don't want to be your therapist. I can't do it. It hurts too much. It makes me so angry. I don't want that. *I don't want that.* I feel like we both deserve so much more. You deserve to be happy and I will always support you to be as happy as you can, but no longer at my expense."

Siona Peterous:

And then, Jade did the one thing she'd never been able to do with her mom before. She gave her an ultimatum.

Jade:

"If you can't respect my boundaries, if we cannot have a better relationship from this conversation forward, we can't do *The Nutcracker* every Christmas that we usually do. We can't do our Trader Joe runs. We can't have these long phone call conversations. I don't want to have this kind of contact. I will go no contact if this happens again."

Brandi:

It didn't go well. Jade's very headstrong, and as much as I love that about her, when I'm on the receiving end of it, it's not good.

Siona Peterous:

After Jade set her foot down, there wasn't much else to say. She walked back to her car, unsure of what might come next.

Jade:

I did not think my mom was going to talk to me ever again after I told her my new rules, essentially. I was bracing for it. I was absolutely bracing for it.

Brandi:

I just remember feeling, like, really sad after. I didn't cry, but I remember, like, I went for a walk. I did a walk after that, and just the whole time I was walking, I just felt, like, really, really sad. And I was just, like, "Wow, Brandi. You really messed up. You really messed up, and how do you fix this?"

Siona Peterous:

Jade and Brandi didn't speak for 48 hours. Now, maybe two days isn't a lot of time

for some mothers and daughters, but for these two, it was a huge deal. It made Jade anxious and uncomfortable, so she did the only thing she felt she could do, she gave herself an epic pep talk.

Jade:

“I’m an independent woman. I don’t have to lean on to my mom for support or for help or anything. I’m okay. And you know, I have friends that are navigating their own life without their parents present and they’re doing fine. If they’re not, then they’re finding a way.” I was really scared.

[electronic music notes]

Siona Peterous:

When Jade laid it all out for her mother in the park, Brandi’s first instinct was to fall back on old patterns.

Brandi:

I was in shock at the way that she was speaking to me, and in hindsight I realized that she spoke to me that way because I really hurt her. But I was still like, “I’m your mom. Don’t disrespect me.”

Lux Alptraum:

But on the way home, it hit Brandi that this was serious; she could lose her relationship with her daughter. She didn’t know it of course, but she was feeling the same fear that had kept Jade from setting a boundary for so many years. And now, when Brandi felt it, it led her to rethink how she’d been treating Jade.

Brandi:

So, that’s when I had to, kind of, look back at myself like, “Why do you do this? Why are you choosing to do this? Just stop.” This is your daughter, you know. You absolutely don’t want to go through life with her upset with me. Something that was in my control to make right.

Siona Peterous:

It wasn’t immediately obvious to Brandi how she might make things work with Jade. But as she thought about what to do, a memory from childhood came rushing back to her.

Brandi:

I have an uncle that... he’s passed away now, but I remember growing up, he was one of my favorite uncles and he was, like, teasing me and it, like, really hurt my feelings. And I remember I hid under my bed and I was crying because I was so hurt. And then he came and apologized to me for that.

And I do remember thinking, like, “Wow, he must really care about me because he took the time to apologize.” I guess I did learn something from that, you know; that other people’s feelings matter, and maybe if it wasn’t your intent to hurt, you’re still capable of hurt. And that’s probably the biggest lesson as an adult, I’ve learned, like, maybe you don’t intentionally do things, but you’re still capable of hurting people.

Lux Alptraum:

There was another reason that apology stood out for Brandi. Just like her daughter, she hadn’t grown up getting many apologies from adults. But her uncle had been willing to see her as another person whose feelings mattered — not as a disrespectful child. That’s a rare gift.

Most adults are so fixated on what kids don’t know that they forget what kids do know: their own feelings. When an adult apologizes to a kid, it tells them that their feelings deserve respect. And Brandi realized she could offer Jade that same kindness.

So she spent a full two days thinking about what her daughter had said to her. She talked it over with her therapist. She sought advice from her friends. And she realized that there was one way to fix things: she needed to apologize. Properly. Not “I’m sorry that you felt hurt” or “I’m sorry but you need to watch your tone.”

Siona Peterous:

This time around, Jade and Brandi decided to talk in a less public space. Instead of sitting outside on a park bench, they sat in the privacy of Brandi’s bedroom. It put them both at ease and let them focus on the conversation at hand instead of worrying about whether or not a stranger would overhear. And as they sat together in the comfort of a familiar space, Brandi finally said the words Jade had been waiting so long to hear.

Brandi:

“I’m sorry that I hurt you. I’m sorry that I was selfish. I’m sorry,” you know, that I alienated her relationship with not only myself but her dad as well.

[transcendent music with “I’m Sorry” echoing quietly]

Jade:

And I never had an apology like that before where she didn’t ask anything of me. She didn’t ask for me to change my tone or anything. During that entire apology, I didn’t have to rebut, or I didn’t have to disagree, or I didn’t have to defend myself. I just sat there and I heard my mom’s perspective.

It felt so intentional and thoughtful. That's what made the apology so different for me this time.

[soothing electronic notes]

I felt like all the weight was taken off of my breath. It made me feel like this is the start of a relationship that I longed for with my family for so long. I finally felt seen as a daughter, just the daughter. Seen as a wonderful, growing, young adult that had her own dreams and her own problems too. I finally had space to exist the way I wanted to. And it feels amazing.

Siona Peterous:

Jade hadn't asked her mom to apologize. She says the idea didn't even cross her mind. It was a great apology, but Jade knew better than to accept it right away, because she knew there was a chance that Brandi would go back to her old ways. But it turned out to be legit. Brandi has kept her word.

Brandi:

I feel like now that... like, there's so many other things for us to discuss. We have so many things... so much in common and even the things that we don't have in common, like, I'm interested in hearing about.

Jade:

This completely changed the definition that I have of having a mother; what does a mother-daughter relationship look like now? Since I've verbalized "this is what I don't want," okay, how can we make it work without that... It was such a big part of our relationship, what can we do now? And so it was just like, you know... but we found a way to make it work and it doesn't feel any different.

I feel so appreciated, so heard. I don't have any problems to verbalize anymore.

[soothing electronic notes]

Lux Alptraum:

Good apologies can resolve conflicts. Great ones can transform relationships. But Brandi's apology to Jade took things one step further.

Jade:

It changed my complete perspective on apologies. It showed me that it's okay to admit that you're wrong. It's okay to ground yourself and to realize that you've made a mistake. It's okay for you to open up this environment of vulnerability to say, "Okay, I realize that I screwed up bad and this is how much I love you, to make things better. This is how much I love you, to do right by you." Forget the mother-daughter, power dynamic. I see you as someone I truly adore and admire."

Siona Peterous:

Brandi's apology embodies everything we've been talking about this season. She listened. She relinquished power. Most of all, she actually changed.

Dr. Nick Smith:

No, I think that's... You know, it's a wonderful story, and we can often focus on how apologies go wrong and focus a lot of our attention on criticizing the apology. And sometimes we can be so hypercritical that, like "Ah, apologies. More harm than good. Forget about it." And having stories like this reminds me of the basic... people reconciling.

Lux Alptraum:

That's apology expert Nick Smith again.

Nick Smith:

You know, an apology is an incredibly powerful tool for just humans getting along on this ball of rock in space, right? It's like, okay, that's humans, like, doing well, right? Like, humans make mistakes, and we grow, and apologies can help us improve.

Lux Alptraum:

Private apologies, like the one that Brandi gave Jade, aren't the same as the public apologies we've spent most of this season talking about. But people, and companies, and nations that have to apologize publicly can learn a big lesson from this story. To apologize well, you have to stop thinking just about yourself and put whoever you hurt before your public reputation, your image, or your national pride.

I wanted to make this show, a whole podcast about apologies because I really believe that they can be transformative. But what I didn't expect was for my own opinion about apologies to be transformed in the process.

I still love apologies, but I'm no longer as fixated on the moment of apology itself or the exact words that get said. As lovely as Brandi's apology to Jade was, I've learned that the precise way in which an apology is delivered isn't the most important thing. A typo-ridden text can be more meaningful than a beautifully crafted PR statement. It's the intention and commitment behind the words that matter the most.

Siona Peterous:

In some ways, my thoughts on apologies remain the same. The moment that a person or institution says "I'm sorry" doesn't mean much without changed behaviors. But my opinion has definitely expanded, the same way that Lux has developed a little bit more of a critical eye, I have caught a little bit of her optimism. Even if someone reneges on their promise to be better and do better, the feeling

that comes with someone telling you they are sorry can be euphoric and it can create a foundation of healing.

Apologies aren't easy, and most aren't usually great, but the words "I'm sorry" can help people move forward. They create expectations for the near and far future, and being aware of how an apology *can* be misused doesn't mean we should dismiss the power of it. After all, there has to be a reason why we're all obsessed with apologies, right?

[uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]

Lux Alptraum:

I wish I could say that we'd unlocked some recipe to make apologies easy. On paper, it seems like they should be. It's just two words, right? "I'm sorry"?

But we've been working on this show for over a year, spending every day thinking about what makes apologies tick. And we still don't have all the answers. And maybe that's okay. Apologies aren't a skill you can master and be done with. They're something you have to keep working at as you grow, and change, and learn.

And I do hope you've learned something from this series. I hope it's made you think a little bit differently about what makes apologies good or bad and the ways that apologies can help people heal. Most of all, I hope that if there's an apology you know you should give, you finally work up the courage to make it.

Maybe it won't be perfect. Maybe it will never be accepted. But as long as you really mean it, and really commit to change, it's still worth the effort.

[crescendo whooshing and a group of voices resonating "I'm sorry"]

[outro music; uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]

This has been an Audible Original. Produced by Bucket of Eels. Hosted by Lux Alptraum.

Our Executive Producers are Lara Blackman for Audible and Rose Eveleth for Bucket of Eels. Produced by Siona Peterous and Julia Llinas Goodman. Edited by Julia Furlan and Candace Manriquez Wren. Sound design by Ariana Martinez. Original music by Michael Aquino. Episode art by Augusto Zambonato. Acquisition and Development: Zack Ross. Vice President of Audible Studios: Mike Charzuk. Editor-in-Chief, Audible Original Publishing: David Blum.

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