



# No Apologies

Seven writers on the lies they tell, the truths they stopped believing, and the inhibitions they've shed

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNE BENTLEY

No Apologies

## For my white lie

BY MARY LAURA PHILPOTT

**"I WISH I COULD!"** It's my go-to response when turning down an invitation, but it's not exactly true.

Well, sometimes it is. For example, if you're having people over to feed your baby goats, but I have to go out of town for work that day, I really do wish I could come to your farm. I'd rather do that than just about anything.

But if you've invited me to a sports-themed gathering or told me about an upcoming three-hour budget meeting, "I wish I could" is a lie. It's a lie of omission, though, which is better than a regular lie. In a lie of omission, two people just assume different things about what's left unsaid.

When you hear "I wish I could," your imagination might automatically complete my response as "I wish I could go to your makeup party/documentary screening/child's talent show." If that's what you understand me to be saying, great. I may not want to go to your pottery exhibit (I really don't), but I don't want to make you sad either. So this works for both of us.

If I'm being honest about how that sentence really ends, most of the time it means "I wish I could please you by



doing the thing you're asking me to do; however, I'm not going to do it." I'd love to say I'm a reformed people pleaser, but I'm only reformed enough to say no to your charity auction (and send a check, of course—it's a good cause!), not reformed enough to be explicitly clear and say, "I'd rather eat glass than attend a fundraiser on a Friday." I admit it: I like being liked. Who doesn't?

It made me happy that, when a friend asked last week, "Come try my hot yoga class tomorrow?" and I answered, "I wish I could!" she walked away smiling. Plus, who knows? Maybe I'll be in the mood for hot yoga next time. Probably not, but I've left the window open for her to ask me again. All sorts of possibilities lie ahead of us.

It's possible, for instance, that I might ask her to brunch sometime and she won't want to go—because she prefers sleeping in or she's had enough socializing lately or she just hates mimosas. When she says, "I wish I could," and lets her voice trail off at just the right moment, I won't ask her to clarify.

Have I ruined my fallback phrase by spilling the truth here? Nah. I'll keep saying it with zero apologies, and maybe now you will too, and we'll all give one another this graceful way out. We can grant each other kindness without enjoying all the same things—even if we wish we could.

MARY LAURA PHILPOTT IS THE AUTHOR OF THE MEMOIR-IN-ESSAYS *I MISS YOU WHEN I BLINK*.

## No Apologies

# For hitting snooze

BY ELIZABETH SILE

**WHETHER OR NOT** you're one to google things like the habits of successful people, you have seen headlines such as "Why 4 a.m. Is the Most Productive Hour" (whatever you say, *Wall Street Journal*). Unless I've been forced to book a 7 a.m. flight, I'm still sleeping at 5, 6, 7 a.m.—until 7:30 a.m., when I begin to play a game of snooze chicken with my alarm. As you've gathered: I'm not a morning person.

Don't think I haven't spent years trying to become one (and for the record, I'm not habitually late or burning the midnight oil). I've given up caffeine, tried alarm clocks with literal bells and whistles, headed to bed at 9 p.m., cut out screens.

After years of trying to change—internalizing those articles' views on success and productivity—I stopped. The fact is, I'm hardwired this way. The world doesn't cater to late risers, but I've found some ways to cope (yes to lunch meetings; no to 8 a.m. coffee chats). And finally, I'm owning it. I'm a smart, reliable, and productive person all day—except first thing.

ELIZABETH SILE IS *REAL SIMPLE*'S FEATURES EDITOR.

## No Apologies

# For being vulnerable

BY CANDICE CARTY-WILLIAMS

**I'M ABOUT TO TURN 30.** I've known my closest group of friends since we were 18, but it was only this year that I was able to tell them how I actually feel when guys (inconsequential ones, usually) mess me around.

These close friends—there are four of them, all excellent, woke white girls—and I talk to each other most days, but I threw them together into one group chat because we realized we were all just repeating ourselves by telling each other the same thing. In one digitally encrypted place, we talk about delayed trains, work woes, forgotten packed lunches, you name it. No subject is too mundane for the five of us. Nothing is off-limits either. We message about what kind of contraceptive methods are working best and discuss the best day in our menstrual cycles to use Thinx absorbent underwear. We spend hours texting about relationship breaks and breakups, and an obscene amount of time is spent tapping our thumbs frantically on our screens when it comes to bad dates and worse sex. You're getting the picture: The floor is open.

We love to talk about everything. I don't mind sharing my dating horror stories with anybody, let alone my closest friends. But when it came to how these encounters were really affecting me, I was completely, flat-out lying to my four closest friends. They had always allowed me to be myself. But I also wanted to be the strong black girl. That meant hiding how bad I felt.

After a particularly shocking string of events with a friend of a friend I met last year, when asked what the latest update was, I quickly explained that I'd blocked him and would need one of them to hide me when we inevitably saw him out again. "Hahahaaaa don't worry though, is what it is! Ha!" I typed out, my face dead straight, no trace of laughter on my lips.

The next day, I took my phone out of my pocket and composed another message. "Hi girls. I actually feel really bad. I know I might seem like I can handle stuff, but actually every time a man makes me feel worthless and pointless, it just erodes my sense of who I am." I took a deep breath and sent it. For the first time, I was honest. Within seconds, all four had replied with messages of love and support, with fierce, allied anger and threats of turning up at his house. If I'd known this would be the result, I might have been a different person by now. One less full of anguish and shame and sadness, maybe. But now that I know how good it feels to be open, to be vulnerable, to talk about the difficult subjects with as much ease as I talk about bikini waxing, life feels a whole lot fuller.

CANDICE CARTY-WILLIAMS IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL *QUEENIE*.



No Apologies

## For my impossible contradictions

BY CATHERINE NEWMAN



**BITING INTO A FORKFUL** of lemony raw kale feels to me like life itself. But also? So do Cheez-Its. These are two true things. I am a grammar nerd—a lifelong defender of the distinction between, say, “I” and “me”—who doesn’t correct anybody anymore because I’m starting to think language is yours to do with as you like. I am an extroverted introvert. I love cooking; I hate making dinner every night. I have a friend who’s lots of fun but a terrible confidant. I dance and drink with her. I tell her nothing important. Light can be both wave and particle. I don’t know quantum mechanics, but I’m starting to understand the possibility of impossible contradictions.

Newly 50, I’m living inside a buoyant, illuminated greenhouse of ambiguity rather than the dark and certain cell of my own past conviction. “I don’t know” is something I say all the time now. “I’m not sure.” I still fight with my husband—I pick one of our 30-year battles about emotional responsibility, atonement, the laundry, the compost—but sometimes I nod and say, “Maybe I’m wrong,” and he laughs, the thought bubble over his head asking, “Who are you?”

This gentling worldview does not represent an absence of passion or a wimpy concession to bullies, injustice, racism, or mansplainers. I’m not ambivalent about bigotry, and I have abundant ideas and plenty to say. But in other cases, I’m learning to hold two different, even opposing, truths rather than always judging one to be wrong and chucking it to the wolves.

My queer teenage daughter has explained the term genderqueer to me—the way it doesn’t ask you to pick a single gender from a system that imagines only opposites; your body is not a form on which you have to check “male” or “female.” I identify strongly as a woman. But I am starting to think that I might be, I don’t know, *ideaqueer*. *Lifegueer*. I can’t pick—am suddenly not sure I ever had to. My English mother uses the expression “in your altogether” for nakedness, and I love it so much. It feels like the perfect metaphor for wholeness laid bare. I’m living in my altogether.

But also? Even this is not certain, my alleged uncertainty. Because I am picturing my beloveds reading this—my husband and children, a dear friend with whom I’ve been politically at odds, my opinionated father, the readers of my etiquette column—and laughing. “Reeeeeeally?” they might think, or say. “You’re not sure what you think?” And I will have to say, truthfully, with the leafy greens and the junk food laid out on my metaphorical table, “Yes. And also no.”

CATHERINE NEWMAN IS *REAL SIMPLE*’S MODERN MANNERS COLUMNIST, AS WELL AS THE AUTHOR OF THE MEMOIRS *CATASTROPHIC HAPPINESS* AND *WAITING FOR BIRDY*.



No Apologies

## For being a cat person

BY ANDREA BARTZ

**CAT PEOPLE LIKE ME** have always had to self-identify a little quietly; it’s more socially acceptable to adore pups and their goofy, slobbery affection. But today, dog-ma is out of control. Witness the massively popular Netflix documentary series about good dogs, the wild backlash when a study demonstrated that dogs (duh) aren’t that smart.

I have no problem with my friends’ dogs (except when they’re the reason a friend can’t meet right after work or has to leave a party early—though that’s not the dog’s fault). But, c’mon, we’re even indoctrinating our youth in dog worship: I had to go to several baby stores to find a single dang item with a cat on it to give to a cat owner friend’s new baby. Faces of Frenchies plastered every onesie I saw.

Cats are awesome. They’re clean and soft and funny, and when they choose to curl up next to you, it’s pure joy—because their affection isn’t knee-jerk. Oh, sit down (sit!)—it’s fine for us to prefer different fur children. And I, for one, am tired of apologizing for preferring cats to dogs. How cat person of me.

ANDREA BARTZ IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL *THE LOST NIGHT*.



## No Apologies

# For how I live my life

BY MALLIKA RAO

**I GREW UP SURROUNDED** by aunts. Women—unrelated to me by blood, of my mother's era and birthplace—seemed forever in our home or we in theirs, a makeshift family of Indians in Texas, where we all, improbably, lived. Many of these women grew up with wildly different options available to them than my friends and I had. Intergenerational, female-to-female judgment felt unavoidable.

In college, Facebook arrived. My adult life took shape in various cities, and online. Aunts I once saw and touched became part of a virtual, somewhat sinister chorus. When I began writing on the internet professionally, commenters told me what was wrong with my writing, and by extension my character—as an aunt might have

commented on how I'd overplucked my eyebrows and thus shown myself a failure at basic tasks of femininity.

In 2007, a white friend, whose jury must have held her to different standards, posted a photo of me kissing a boy. "No big deal, but it would be amazing if..." I emailed. She didn't delete the photo in time. An aunty got to me, via her daughter. I felt I could see the mother speaking through the girl as the latter expressed how the photo surprised her. It didn't seem like me. I felt a mix of emotions that reminded me of nights in college when I might take a hit of a joint and worry suddenly if all my friends merely tolerated me. Every spoken line felt like code for silent ones, a subtext that circled around a terrifying idea: I was an inexcusably flawed person. Everyone knew.

Soon after, Michelle Obama became a known personality. In an interview, Larry King asked if she was surprised by campaign life. She responded that she and her husband weren't new to politics. A national campaign brought "more of the same, except more people are watching." I saw a point of reference. "If you're secure in yourself and you sort of know who you are," she continued, before moving on to a new idea—as if that phrase held everything she needed to say.

Something clicked. Hadn't Facebook only heightened a sense born when the aunts commented in person, or when I sat in a circle passing a joint? If Michelle Obama could withstand the judgment of every adult in the known world, perhaps so could I. The notion of self-security—of living up to a set of internal standards—seemed integral. As I worked on articulating and meeting these standards, I also changed my view of outside judgment. Overtly judgmental people can seem, more than others, to be imbalanced in their vision, scared themselves of judgment. The aunty whose daughter questioned my ethics after a kiss was known to look askance at every girl but her own. I realized I had only myself to rely on as a gauge of the quality of judgment.

To be able to assess it at all, though, I needed to be open. I began to see scrutiny as a gift—the internet not as courtroom but as laboratory. If I didn't look my best, physically or metaphysically, it was a reflection of a current reality. I could pretend this reality wasn't true, or I could think of ways to change what bothered me about it. Or I might decide nothing needed changing. In time, the judgment that seemed to matter most was my own.

MALLIKA RAO IS A WRITER. HER WORK CAN BE FOUND IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, *THE ATLANTIC*, AND OTHER OUTLETS.

## No Apologies

# For moving my kid around

BY TAMMY LYNNE STONER

**MY MOTHER WAS** an army brat, so I grew up hearing about how awful it was to move from place to place. I internalized the message that I'd be a terrible parent to do that to my child, if it could be avoided. Now, 30 years later, I have a son, Oliver, who has lived in 10 places in seven cities across two countries.

At 18, I left for college, excited to leave my small town and move to Philadelphia to live an artist's life like the ones I'd read about in books. And I did, though with a driving restlessness to continue experiencing new scenes, which ultimately led me to live in 17 cities in five states and three countries. All the while, I knew this for sure: It's wrong to have kids if I can't stay put, so I better keep moving while I can.

Then, at 35, I awoke to the strangest serenade from my ovaries, a truly moving rendition of "Rock-a-bye Baby." Nine months later, my lovely Oliver was born—and I knew I had five more years to wander before I had to settle down for his 12 years of schooling. Twelve years. For me, 12 years felt like being entombed in Tupperware.

Luckily, after moving around the West Coast a bit, Oliver, my lady friend, and I fell in love with Portland, Oregon, and stayed for 10 years (with a nine-month stint in San Francisco—I'm only human), enabling me to "do right" and give my kid some roots.

Then Oliver surprised us by asking if he could go to high school in Europe. My lady friend, who'd been wanting to move to Europe for years, yelled from the kitchen as she simultaneously called her Swiss-based company: "Get yer passports ready!"

Oliver enjoys new cultures and new people—and maybe the chance to be new too. Even though I spent my life intrigued and inspired by new places, I'd carried this idea that being a good parent meant staying put for your kids. I was shocked to see how ready I was to pass that idea down to my children.

When Oliver asked to move, I allowed myself to feel how stagnant I'd become, holding firm to the notion that we wouldn't leave Portland until he graduated from high school. In that moment, I evaluated my deeply held, unconscious notions about these roots.

Experiences and art—not single places—are my roots; Oliver is rooted in friendships and challenges. This difference reminded me of what I intuitively knew as a child: Roots vary. What's most important is to be grounded, however that manifests. And that's an idea I do want to pass down.

TAMMY LYNNE STONER IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL *SUGAR LAND*.

