

## EPISODE 4: PLOT

JANIELLE: Hey, Carson.

CARSON: Hey, Janielle.

JANIELLE: And hey, everyone. Welcome back to Untitled Dad Project, my meta-narrative quest to figure out my own story, finally reckon with the Dad Character I never knew, and find that damn meaningful narrative resolution. And today we're talking about plot. Plot is... easy. Plot is everything that happens to a character, the events that happen in the story, in the order that they happen. So basic Aristotelean Plot Structure, if you like flash back to some whiteboard or blackboard at some point, you see like a rollercoaster shape, a line that goes up and comes back down. It starts with exposition, that flat line. [*roller coaster noises*] Yeah, here we are. It's our stasis, everything is as it always has been, and then all of a sudden, whoa! The inciting incident.

CARSON: Oh my God! Something's happened!

JANIELLE: We're going up, we're going up. And that's all the rising action is happening. More stuff is happening, oh my God, *more* stuff is happening?? Until...

CARSON: [*Jaws theme*] Dah dun, dah dun, dah dun, dah dun, DAH DAH DAH!

JANIELLE: The climax, where the big thing happens, and then, from then on out, it is falling action.

CARSON: Oh my gosh, things are falling into place.

JANIELLE: Until we hit the resolution. We are back on a flat line, and everything is sadder because we didn't get what we wanted, or happier because we got what we wanted, or some kind of ambiguous, post-modern, mumblecore film where we kinda got some stuff, but we didn't get others, but we are resolved, Man.

CARSON: Hmm. I was on that roller coaster, thank you.

JANIELLE: That was gorgeous. So that's plot structure. Plot as a concept is pretty definable. But for my story, plot is a problem. Because I can't let go of my other plot, the plot that could have been. We learned in our first episode that my inciting incident was my dad dying, because my stasis was thinking that not having a dad doesn't matter. It's "I'm fine, everything's fine." And my dad's death broke that stasis, made me realize that it's mattered, he's mattered, it's mattered this whole time. But I *thought* that my inciting incident was going to be that email that I was drafting in my head to my dad before he died. That's what would break my stasis, from inaction to action, from silence to suddenly saying something. So when he died before I could send the

email, it didn't feel like my plot developed, or took an interesting turn. It felt like my plot broke. Wait, hold up, that was my inciting incident. See, it's *plot* that screwed me over. The events went wrong, they-they happened in the wrong order. I'm carrying this plot that should have been with me, in my pocket, with so much regret and remorse, and I'm wondering now... What do you do when your plot twists? Welcome back to Untitled Dad Project - Chapter 4: Plot.

[MUSIC]

[AD BREAK]

JANIELLE: Here I am in this plot, the dead dad one, and I'm discovering this giant problem with being alive is that we get one plot, right? We just live one life in linear order? Chronologically through time? That's insane when you think about it very hard. Like, who do I talk to about this? That's insane! You get ONE story IN ORDER.

CARSON: You want string theory.

JANIELLE: I want string theory.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: What is...what is string theory?

CARSON: Well it's a lot bigger than what I know about string theory... But what I understand string theory to be is, like, if you are here on one line, and everything you do makes that line split into other strings, so there could be different consequences for everything you do.

JANIELLE: Like multiple parallel universes?

CARSON: Yes.

JANIELLE: Multiverses?

CARSON: Yes, and they split into different strings every time any decision is made.

JANIELLE: Okay.

CARSON: And so you want string theory where you can live one life on this journey, knowing that you're also living all these other lives on these other journeys.

JANIELLE: Yeah, and I wanna--I wanna live the other lives, too.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: I do, I want string theory. I want alternate strings, but I don't just want like all of the potential alternate strings that could be happening at once, even though that sounds super fun. I specifically want all of the strings that stem off from the inciting incident where I did send my dad that email. And it's left me wondering, as the writer of this story, like-like what do you do as a writer when your inciting incident isn't what you kinda thought it would be in the story that you're working on? But more importantly, I'm wondering as a character in the story, what do I do now that my plot has changed?

CARSON: So I Googled things.

JANIELLE: You googled things

CARSON: I googled things like: "expert in plot," "Aristotelian plot structure," uh, "professor of plot," and that led us to Peter.

PETER: I'm Peter Brooks. Uh, we're talking together, I think, because I wrote a book called *Reading for the Plot* many years ago, and I've continued to be interested in narrative and how narrative plot structure our lives. And, um...

JANIELLE: An event (you, Carson, googling that precise combinations of words) led to you finding Peter, which led to an event, me hopping on a plane to New York, then a train over to Princeton, then a walk across a campus into a small office filled with books.

PETER: Uh, I think... that's why you came to me, and I'm delighted to have had this conversation.

JANIELLE: We jump in, and I do that thing where I catch him up on all the facts. I was drafting an email to the father I never knew, but always planned on reconciling with, but then he died unexpectedly six months later, none of his friends knew I existed, and I'm getting pretty good at it, and then I wrap it up.

JANIELLE: ...What do you do when the plot suddenly changes, and how do I create a meaningful plot that drives towards some kind of resolution?

PETER: I mean, if I can just look at it sort of clinically from outside, what happened, I think, obviously creates more interesting plot possibilities. You-- I mean, had you met your father, had you found that you could talk to one another, that you could reconcile, uh, this great gap of the past, um, it would have been, uh, a very nice plot for you, no doubt, but a fairly conventional plot. You're faced with constructing something very new, um, and something that involves... How should I put it? Mourning without having the body there, um, as it were.

JANIELLE: Yeah, absolutely, mourning a ghost, and the ghost won't even talk to me.

PETER: Yeah.

CARSON: This reminds me a lot of what happened in the Taylor Anne interview, where you realized, "Oh, well if I have to be in a soap opera genre, at least it's a good one." If you have to have this plot, at least it's an interesting one.

JANIELLE: Yeah I- I can concede that maybe my "wrong" plot is more interesting. So I think this is where I split into two, right? I split into a character who is, like, sure as hell she's in a broken, wrong-ass story, and her plot is wrong, and will not concede that point. And I'm also the writer who can say, "Oh, this actually, this got more interesting. So, like, now how do I make this pay off for my Jan Character who is stubborn and sure as hell that she's in the wrong story?" Some more good news, to Peter, my preoccupation with plot isn't odd at all.

PETER: Plot is essential. I mean, it's what structures your experience of time, both in fictions, and I think in your own life, you're always more or less semi-consciously telling yourself the story of your life and where it went wrong, where it got blocked, where you regret you didn't do something differently,

JANIELLE: Plot gives structure and form to time, because time on its own, is our prison.

PETER: We are subject to time in a way we're not subject to space. We can move around in space, um, anywhere now, but in time you're limited. I mean, you're moving forward in time, whatever that means, and then it comes to an end. So understanding the shape of time or the shape that you make in your own life and time, it seems to be very difficult and very important to us.

JANIELLE: Carson, this helps me make so much sense out of the feeling I had when I got that email that said, you know, "Rick Tears deceased." I felt acutely, oh, this is final. I can't go back, you know, a week or a day or even just, like, 15 minutes, just 60 seconds to go draft an email real quick and send it, and he could read it, like, no, nope. From here on out. Your dad will always be dead, and time will move forward, and you don't get to stop it. So final. Such a prison.

PETER: Well, I mean it's almost just reading the notes you sent, it's almost as if you, uh, have a Victorian multi-plot novel going.

JANIELLE: Okay, explain to me--

PETER: You have this one novel that you were anticipating of meeting your father, talking to him, perhaps reconciling with him in a way that would sort of cast your life in a, in a different light, right? That it would be a story of loss and refinding, and perhaps great love, whereas now that's impossible. You've got another plot going. But it seems to me that your story ought to include both possibilities.

JANIELLE: How so?

PETER: Well, one possibility, you know, there are often plots in multiplot novels that, um, that suggest different outcomes to the same story.

JANIELLE: So he's offering me string theory.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: Like can't your story involve the multiple plots living next to each other at once? But that doesn't feel like, that doesn't feel like a meaningful narrative resolution does it? That feels like multiple different "could have beens" each with their own resolution, like not one capital, you know, capital letter 'O' capital letter 'R': One Resolution.

CARSON: Yeah, just because you could have all of them doesn't give you resolution.

JANIELLE: Hmm. Peter then zooms back in on my Dad Character.

PETER: You have to find a way to, what, create this father, I suppose. Um, uh, out of your own capacities for imagination and empathy.

JANIELLE: Yeah. I'm recreating him based on birthday cards he sent, uh, and the stories that I'm learning from his friends about what kind of person he was, what he liked.

PETER: And uh, what you're discovering about your father through his friends, Does that, does that jive with your imaginary father or not? I mean, you must've spent a lot of time dreaming about that, imagining him, right? And now you discover a figure coming out of all these stories about him. Did it, does that sort of correspond to your childhood imaginings of a father?

JANIELLE: It...That's a really good question. He, um, I, I sort of very carefully didn't think about him.

CARSON: Is that true that you didn't imagine him, or are you maybe trying to avoid engaging with painful memories again?

JANIELLE: No. Yeah, fair question. I, no. It's absolutely true. I, I tried very carefully to not imagine my dad as a, as a child. Like I didn't, I didn't dream about him. I didn't imagine him. I, I think I pretty quickly figured out that if you don't wonder about him, then he's kind of not real, and he can't hurt you. So, yeah, Jan in this interview is being honest about that.

JANIELLE: One woman said, you know, it's such a shock to me, because I always said it's such a shame Rick will never be a father. He'd be so wonderful at it. It just seems like to this man, I

existed in a wormhole, a loophole, I wasn't really *real*, maybe. I seem to have existed in a parallel universe to whatever was real for him.

PETER: Gosh, that's fascinating. I mean, you might almost conceive of writing, uh, part of the narrative from his point of view.

JANIELLE: Oh, okay.

PETER: Why, why did he feel that you were living in a parallel universe? Why couldn't he break through whatever barrier it was and come and see you? Um, and I think this happens to men, that they feel excluded from a certain situation, maybe excluded themselves. I, you know, I know nothing about that. But um, it would be interesting speculatively to try and project your voice like a ventriloquist into him, uh, at some point in your narrative.

JANIELLE: Yeah, that would be, that would be, that would be...

PETER: Very difficult to do. I don't know. It may be impossible.

JANIELLE: What's hard about it is, is I'm on a quest for narrative closure, and then I cannot divorce myself from this quest for literal closure. Normally when I'm creating, it's all speculative.

CARSON: So yeah. If you are often creating this speculative world, why do you think you feel so uncomfortable doing that for your dad? Cause this isn't the first time this has come up. You said the same thing about, you didn't want to write the lines for your dad for the soap opera scene we did.

JANIELLE: I don't know what that hangup specifically is. Um... I'm concerned that I will make a dad. I will craft a dad. I will ventriloquist my way into the words of a dad that is more palatable for me, and then I will give myself a crutch. I want to know what he really would have said.

CARSON: But does it feel like crutches to explore multiple reasons, multiple things that he might have said? All of the things, the one that's more palatable for you and the one that might be horrible and that you never want to imagine?

JANIELLE: I guess not. I just... Call my bluff. You know, I want to know him. Not my version of him. No one's right about him, probably. They're probably each tapping into one facet of who he was, and I want to know what my facet of him would have been. Of course, I won't know the whole person. No one knows the whole anybody. We contain multitudes, right? I just want my shot at that. What would he have been to me? I don't know. I don't know.

[MUSIC]

PETER: Though of course your story is the most important in all of this, but you might want to imagine: what was the source of that alienation? Was it fear? I mean, Men are, men are afraid of reproduction, I'm convinced, it's scary having children.

JANIELLE: Just thematically. Just as a, or, or just a--

PETER: Well, I think the first child I had, it made, made me feel very much in touch with death, you know?

JANIELLE: Oh.

PETER: Because you realize at that point you're, you're just replaceable. Yeah. I mean, I, I, I loved the child.

JANIELLE: Of course.

PETER: But still I felt that, you know... TS Elliot puts it-- What is it? Birth, copulation, and death? And that's all it's about.

JANIELLE: And so you had done the first two, and go, "No, there's only one left." Huh.

PETER: So, um, I mean, I can see a man being scared of having reproduced, even before the baby was born, but--

JANIELLE: What you're describing, that fear, and I can relate to somebody who's afraid.

PETER: Mhmm. Sure.

JANIELLE: I can relate to that.

PETER: Well, I mean, isn't that the whole point of fiction, is being able to get in someone else's head and look through their eyes, right? Without, without necessarily being judgemental. You may want to be judgmental by the end. But the, the initial act of empathy, or even Keats calls it being a chameleon, a chameleon poet, he calls it, you know, uh, being able to espouse other points of view.

JANIELLE: I really relate to that. Iago makes a lot of sense.

PETER: Oh, absolutely.

JANIELLE: So I, I relate to that.

PETER: And as a teacher of literature, that's what you're doing all the time, right? It's getting students past their sort of primitive moralism there. I mean, they tend to be so judgmental at that age.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

PETER: Right? And you've got to get beyond that. So I think, I mean, I think part of this story would be, I mean, you might write it starting judgmental and then, uh, moving out into different possible stories that would lead you to something much more complicated, much more morally complicated, for one thing. I mean, yeah, it seems in this sort of stock character, uh, distribution that your father's a bastard, right? Um, but bastards can have their reasons, too.

JANIELLE: Yeah, certainly.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: Let's go ahead and take a break here.

[AD BREAK]

CARSON: Back to you, Janielle, and your conversation with Peter Brooks.

PETER: Obviously you, you were looking for some sort of closure to this story. Where do you think that's gonna lie?

JANIELLE: I don't know. I'm right in the middle of it right now.

PETER: Yeah. Do you think you could ever forgive him? Do you think you should forgive him? Uh, do you think that that's part of the story, or, or would that just be too artificial or too self sacrificing or whatever?

JANIELLE: I...So for Jan character, what I'm interested in having her experience and myself experience is starting from a place, just starting as a child from a place of being like, I'm fine. I don't need a dad. I'm fine.

CARSON: So you definitely don't answer that question.

JANIELLE: That's a straight up pivot.

CARSON: Yup.

JANIELLE: Just a pivot.

CARSON: Uh, do you think, is it because you don't know the answer or because it makes you uncomfortable?

JANIELLE: Um. Yeah. I don't know. Sometimes I-I don't know if this story involves me forgiving him. What a good question. And like, is that forgiveness tied to the resolution? I don't know. Like, forgiveness is so nice. It seems so noble and worthy to be inside a story, but I don't know if that's what this is. It feels like the story, a lot of it, is realizing that I... was owed something.

CARSON: Do you think that forgiveness and resolution live in the alternate timeline? The one where you sent the email?

JANIELLE: Yeah, I think that's... I think that's the major problem with the email that I was trying to send, is that what I was trying to send was something that was like, "I forgive you, and I have no resentment towards you." But I don't think I was ready to say that. Like I wasn't ready to say "I forgive you." And that's why I was so hung up, cause I was trying to find the right words to say that. And I think the reason I was hung-up is cause maybe all I wanted to say in that email was like, "Hi." I don't think I was ready to say "I forgive you," which is why I couldn't send it.

CARSON: Do you feel ready to forgive him? Now?

JANIELLE: Like today?

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: No. No, I don't think so.

CARSON: If you still don't feel ready to forgive him, which I think is totally valid, why do you think that not sending the email is the big regret?

JANIELLE: I think sending anything would have been better than sending nothing and waiting and trying to send something that is perfect and all encompassing. I could've sent, "Hi. I got your email address. I'm wondering what you're doing in the world. I'm not ready to get lunch. I just want you to know that I'm here, and that I'm real, and that I'm not angry at you, or like I haven't dismissed you as like, fuck that guy." Maybe? Honestly even just a "hi" would have been something. He at least knew that I cared.

CARSON: It feels like drafting an email that said "I forgive you" when that's not true would have also been a like violent betrayal.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CARSON: This is, this is an interesting realization for me, because I hear the regret of doing nothing, but it's also the first time I've ever thought about the fact that if you had sent the email, there would also be some regret attached.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CARSON: It may have been lesser of course, but it's the first time that I've ever thought, oh, you'd still have to reckon with the story of your dad character on the alternate timeline.

JANIELLE: Yeah, it's true. There'd be some kind of regret on each timeline, right? On one timeline where I sent something that I was proud of, he has the power to have responded really poorly, like a real asshole. And I would maybe feel regret there. I shouldn't have said anything. There's all kinds of regrets, but I find myself on this one, with one very clear and present regret, which was not having said anything at all.

CARSON: I just, I think, through his death you realize that it really mattered that he wasn't in your life that whole time, and I think had you sent the email, whatever you would have said at some point, him not responding, him responding well, him responding poorly, I think we still would have come to: him not being here mattered and mattered at the whole time.

JANIELLE: Oh yeah, totally. Yeah. It would have found me, you're right, in any of those stories that would have found me the same.

CARSON: That's a thing I haven't considered.

JANIELLE: Yeah, I guess I hadn't either.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: So let's pick up with Peter, talking about where resolution might come from:

PETER: Last words are all over the place of the classic novel, right? Uh, death as a significant moment of transmission from one generation to another. And I don't think it really happens that way, in reality, most people die without, you know, being conscious and in the hospital. So, but I think there's some feeling of wanting, uh, a very significant utterance right on the, on the brink of, of eternity. And there's no way to get that now, so you have to create this, uh, possible reconciliation yourself, and let him off the hook or not. I mean, it seems to be very possible that you'll decide that he's not to be left off the hook.

JANIELLE: So one thing you mentioned a little bit ago was the idea of, of how many stories where, where death functions as transmission of, of power, energy...

PETER: Wisdom, too.

JANIELLE: Wisdom. And that kind of could happen, like, last couple pages, like this meaningful thing. So in my story, death happens right off at the top.

PETER: Right.

JANIELLE: I guess my question is, well, so what do I do with death now that it's at the top of the story? What does death mean? Like what is it, what is its thematic significance at the top of this story?

PETER: I mean, uh, one sort of classic novelistic trope would be person dies in the beginning and leaves a will, or doesn't leave a will.

JANIELLE: Oh. Yeah. Yeah. Right, right.

PETER: You go searching around for the latest version of the will. Uh, which raises the whole question of what do you inherit, either materially or spiritually, from your, from your progenitors? That might be one way to look at it. What, what is left, uh, of this man in your life, right?

JANIELLE: What is his legacy in my life? What does he mean?

PETER: Yeah, What's-what's-what's his testament to you, so to speak?

CARSON: I can't remember, did your dad leave a will?

JANIELLE: I have no idea. And that feels like an important question I probably should have answered at some point. I know that his friends were cleaning out his entire apartment, which had lots of stuff, and they sold his truck and gave me the money from the truck. And I got all the valuable things from his apartment. Anything of value or sentiment. So: I inherited my dad in a box.

CARSON: We should probably go through that box.

JANIELLE: Yeah we should, I... I don't actually want to go through his box as the activation for this episode, this chapter, because I don't think that's an activation of plot, but I think we do need to ask that as a better question than, "What do we learn about a man from the objects he leaves behind?" which is, "What do we learn about the man from the child he leaves behind? What's his inheritance? What's his legacy in her?" Also outside the purview of plot. I got so much from here that has nothing to do with plot. Thank you, Peter. Case in point: Peter and I next veer off from plot again and start talking about what to do with Dad Characters or any character who is morally complicated, or even a villain.

PETER: Good villains are complicated villains, right? And,uh, whose motives uh we can understand. I mean, that's one thing that always interested me about *Heart of Darkness* is the feeling that Marlowe's narrating this story. The reason he is so fascinated by this, this awful man, is that he feels a real, that he could have done that too. A sympathy with the devil.

JANIELLE: I have a horrible question and you can refuse to acknowledge, refuse to acknowledge that I even asked it. But that one sentence you just said sparked a curiosity. W-what, what would it take for you as, as a, as a father to remove yourself from your children's life?

PETER: Um, it's a question that really cuts close to the bone--

JANIELLE: Does it?

PETER: --Because I have a second marriage. When I was already quite old, and then that woman decided to divorce me, um, about five years later. And I was completely unprepared for it. She had taken up with someone else. And, uh, she was a lot younger than I, probably was a bad idea to get married in the first place. But I had these two young daughters, and um, I was at that time teaching at Yale, and she was in DC. And, uh, I just said to myself, I can't... I also have adult kids. How can I be a decent father to these two young girls? Uh, they were, what were they, two and four?

JANIELLE: Oh wow

PETER: Um, I should just let her raise them, and, you know, I'd be a distant benign presence, see them occasionally, and I thought that for a few hours and then said, "No, I can't do that." And actually that's why I left Yale and came to Princeton to be that much closer to them. So I, I see them every weekend. Um, so anyway, that was not a real option for me, but it passed through my mind.

JANIELLE: Yeah, of course.

PETER: And I can see that. I mean fathers are in a weird position, right? Because they're in some sense, once they've done their thing, they're dispensable.

JANIELLE: Yeah. They're nonessential and somehow--

PETER: Like, salmon who climb up the falls and spawn and die.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

PETER: Right?

JANIELLE: I guess I understand that really.

PETER: Well. I understand it as a temptation. Um, but one to refuse or reject.

JANIELLE: Sure.

JANIELLE: I appreciate that he gamely answered that question. Like, this is not where I thought our conversation was going to go.

CARSON: Yeah. He's being really vulnerable.

JANIELLE: He is. But, you know, he also... only considered doing it.

CARSON: Hmm.

JANIELLE: Had he done it...I don't know. But I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have judged him. Right? I would have understood him, if he had, like, not been in his kids' lives.

CARSON: You think so?

JANIELLE: Well that he had, his wife had taken up with some other guy, and they were so young that they would probably really, really attach to that guy as their dad. And... I could see sort of being like, they might be better off without me.

CARSON: Hm.

JANIELLE: I wonder if my dad ever thought that, that I was better off without him. I'm not sure if he would have been right or wrong about that.

JANIELLE: Are there any questions I haven't asked you that are interesting to you or that you, you wanna discuss?

PETER: I think we've covered the ground, uh, pretty well. I mean, the more we've talked, the more I've understood what really is interesting about the story you have to tell. And um, I, I don't think you should insist too much on closure. I think it's gonna be a story that's going to have several different endings, right? Several different possible endings. All of them a little bit in suspense, one with another.

JANIELLE: Don't like that.

CARSON: Why not?

JANIELLE: The point of this is closure.

CARSON: Hmm.

JANIELLE: Like to, to start trying to figure out my own story, only to figure out that the story is even bigger and that I'll never, ever, ever find any closure ever is like... kind of obviously one version of this podcast. And I don't like it. Nope. I want the closure part. I know I might not find it. I see you looking at me. I know I might not find it. I can hear my listener listening to me. I understand, but I'm not, like, giving up.

JANIELLE: I then ask Peter if there's a way that entertaining multiple plots, and multiple Jans, and multiple dads can in itself be a kind of resolution.

PETER: Famous instance, when Dickens finished *Great Expectations*, he showed it to his fellow novelist, Bulwer-Lytton. And Bulwer-Lytton said, "You can't have it end that way. No one's going to accept it." So Dickens went back and rewrote the ending, uh, giving it a much more upbeat feeling. And now most editions print both endings, so you can have two endings next to each other.

JANIELLE: Yeah. Choose your own adventure. You have these literary examples of the, of the multiple narrative strands. And mine, I'm thinking specifically of like my Goosebumps mystery books I read as a younger kid, in which you could choose your own adventure as you went.

PETER: Exactly, yeah.

JANIELLE: And all the fun was--

PETER: John Fowles does that too, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He uh, he gives you two alternate endings to choose. You can't get away with that all the time, but occasionally--

JANIELLE: No, sure, sure. In life, I feel like you can't quite--

PETER: No, life can't quite...

JANIELLE: But in literature you can, and that's the point of this. Thank you so-- We're over time. I really appreciate your, um, I really appreciate you giving me so much of your time.

PETER: Oh, my pleasure.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: Let's take an ad break here, and when we get back, Jan and I are gonna activate her plot. Get your Goosebumps Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books ready.

[AD BREAK]

JANIELLE: What Peter keeps offering me is the option of multiple endings, like that one Dickens novel he mentioned, or multiple plot strings that coexist at once, like in a Victorian mutli-plot structure, so I thought what I could do is activate “plot” by translating it into my version of those, which is the Goosebumps choose-your-own-adventure, and I can let all the different plots coexist in mutual tension, and explore them all, and finally explore my strings that I’ve been missing from our butchered string theory.

CARSON: Yes. Before we do that, there’s a piece of audio that I wanna play for you. This is from immediately after your Peter interview. You’d flown out to New York and taken a train down to interview him, um, so it’s like two and a half years ago, uh, we did this. And I think this piece of audio is really important to our discussion, this is what we ended up talking about.

JANIELLE: This whole week, I’ve been thinking about how powerful our pull towards revisionist history is. Like how desperately we want to make meaning out of things, to make sense out of things, and how, how, how much our brain is wired for like a year down the road, two years down the road to look back and say, ah, it was meant to be that way. You know, I can’t imagine the world where I didn’t, this didn’t happen to me, because look at all the growth and beauty that’s come out of it. I think that’s part of the hard-wiring of being a person, is sort of like a dumb sweet impulse towards redemption. And I think it’s beautiful, and it’s really powerful. That, you know, like my dad’s death is going to lead to so much other beauty in my life, and it must have been meant to be, because it is what happened. But I want to freeze time for a moment and sit right here and say like, no, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Like I think I was supposed to have a dad. I think I was supposed to send him that email and reach out to him and, and, and give some sort of olive branch so that he died not, so he died knowing that I didn’t resent him and that he was a little less alone in the universe. I think I was supposed to do that and I didn’t. And there’s a consequence to that, which is that now I’ll regret it. I think these are bad things that happened, and it’s okay that they’re bad, and they don’t have to have a beauty or a meaning later. Can they just not be bad? Can we not just like sit there? Like I think it’s beautiful that we can create, we can spin beauty out of tragedy. I just think the pit itself, like the tragedy, the mourning, the sadness, like that dark pit is, um, it’s worthy, it’s bad. And I think we should call it as what it is. It’s bad. And it’s not just like the pit on the way to the, the new peak. It is itself just that pit. And... I want to honor that, and I can already feel in myself, like, everything pointing towards a new kind of hope, a new kind of optimism that, that, that tragedy is never without meaning... And that’s fine. And I’m, I’m sure I’ll get there, and none of this will make sense to me anymore. I won’t relate to it. I’ll be in a new space where something beautiful has come out of my dad’s death, right? Like, I’m sure I’ll be just as authentically there, but for a moment I want to authentically be here now and say this is bad. I would choose the story where this didn’t happen. I don’t think I’m less noble, and I think that, uh, I think that I’ll have, my mind will be changed in, you know, a year, two years, three years. I, I just, I know I’ll change my mind. I just want to let senseless tragedies be senseless. Why do they have to have sense? In the-- Oh, you know what I’m doing? I’m grieving! That’s what it is, right? It’s a, I want to sit here for a

minute and just be sad about it, and say this wasn't supposed to happen, and it's a real fucking bummer. Yeah. Okay. So what I want to do is grieve.

CARSON: What I hear you saying in this past debrief is that you actually don't wanna change plots. I hear you saying: you want to sit and acknowledge this grief and this really, really awful pain that you are in, and not move on, and not get over it, but to just, like, be. To sit on that string, and be where you are. So in therapy there's a lot of language, around, like, when something happens to you, when there's trauma, and the language that you hear from a lot of other people is like, "Oh, you are gonna get over it. Uh, you're gonna get past it. You're gonna move on." And for victims, that's actually really not helpful language. What I really prefer, um, having worked on some trauma stuff myself, the language I really like is "integrating." It's this idea of: Something happened to me, something horrible, and I had no control over it, and I don't have to get over it, and I don't have to move on from it. Instead, it is a thing that happened to me that is now integrated into my story. And that grief is integrated, the grief for what could have been, and the desire to move on or not move on is integrated. But it's-it's all there. Still. And so, I hear you in this interview saying, asking to do that. Asking to integrate this. Asking not to move on.

JANIELLE: I wanna sit in the pit.

CARSON: Yeah. Yeah, I wanna be here. I wanna be exactly where I am, and not feel pressure to move on or get over it.

JANIELLE: Hmm. So what I hear you saying is, um, Past Jan in the pit, who I don't feel like anymore, was feeling maybe, like, a little guilty, because like she's talking to me, and she's saying, like, "Future You's not gonna feel as bad," and I was like, "Oh my God, she's right, like, I don't feel that bad anymore." I-- That was true. And now something else is true, which is: I'm starting to feel that tug, to like, spin it into gold, like make it an interesting, like, fun podcast. But...but I felt it then. It was real.

CARSON: Yes.

JANIELLE: And I really thought, "Maybe this is just sad. Maybe this will just always be sad. And maybe, maybe this project will just be the honest chronicles of the meaninglessness of grief. And how senseless it is. And how you never get over it... So I guess what I hear you saying, though, is that: like, the mourning and the feeling it fully, the grieving, and sitting, and letting yourself feel the thing like I did, and integrating that into your story... like... is not spinning it into a story that it isn't. Spinning it into a false, like, sense of a happy ending. And it's not, like, invalidating, well you don't feel that way anymore, so it wasn't real, and it's not the brain chemicals tricking me, like they way when a mom has-gives birth, like, to a baby, and her brain chemicals jump in, her serotonin, or whatever, and like, brainwash her into forgetting exactly how painful it was. Like I'm not brainwashing myself, it's that, like, I'm integrating it.

CARSON: Yeah.

JAN: So like, Past Jan was there, and from here, we'll move forwards. And it will evolve, and it'll change, and it'll feel different. And it was real then. And it feels a little different now. And we're gonna keep going. And it'll always be there. Okay. Okay, so then the point is, so the activation is, that I...honor Past Jan in the pit, who's really right about some stuff. God, I was so sad. I was not okay there for a while.

CARSON: Yeah, we didn't record for quite a while after that.

JANIELLE: Yeah. Hmm. I wanna, like, curl up all those other strings, and tie them in a bow, and have them sit in my pocket, and I will remember them. With pain. And sadness. But I'm on this string. So the opposite of what I said at the beginning of this episode.

CARSON: How funny. So I wonder then if the activation is: we name the other strings and say goodbye.

JANIELLE: Okay. Um, okay. Alright. So recalibrating a choose-your-own-adventure is... Um. Okay. So there's the one that we realized never even had a chance, where Jan carries on unperturbed, where Dad and Jan never actually crossed paths, and he, she never finds out he died, and she never sends the email, and everything's fine, and the stasis is never broken. It, you know, that never would have happened. But to that version of me who just somehow ends up being fine in her stasis, goodbye. Okay, and then there's the one where, um, Jan intervenes and sends the email and, and creates some kind of adult relationship with Dad Character, and he doesn't die, because she, you know, gets him help or something happens, and, and they are able to figure out how to get him what he needs so he doesn't die alone in his apartment, and she's a part of his life as a grownup. Um, and they have some sort of like adult relationship where he's able to explain some things to her, and she understands, and um, and they have some sort of closure that way. Uh, that's not what happened. Goodbye. And then there's the much more realistic one, where Jan does intervene and sends the email, and he still dies, you know, when he died. But before he dies, he sends an email back, and it's a bad email, and she's like, well, good riddance. I was better off without him. Or it's a great email, and she's able to connect with him somehow. And maybe then she's ready to actually forgive him, because he says "I'm sorry." And they correspond for a bit, and then he dies. Which I think is the one I would have picked, you know? Just something. Jan Character just did something, but she didn't. I didn't. I could have, but I didn't. So to that path, I say goodbye. Then there's this one, this path I'm on, where Jan Character doesn't intervene, doesn't send an email, and he dies, and the loss opens up inside her that tries to swallow her. To you, I say, hello. This is our plot. This is our path. This is our string. Let's keep going.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: Next time on Untitled Dad Project, Janielle and I explore prophecies that live at the beginning of our stories, and confront the theme that may have been chasing her her whole life: Daddy Issues, in Chapter 5: Foreshadowing

SHEA: Before I go there, can I address the “daddy issues”?

JANIELLE: I didn’t know what turning to men for attention was, but I decided I better not do it.

DON: In our society, it’s not nice for girls to be angry and rageful.

JANIELLE: Welcome to what it feels like to love people wholeheartedly, and feel pain.

CARSON: See you then.

[CREDITS]

JANIELLE: Untitled Dad Project is co-hosted by me, Janielle Kastner, and the wonderful Carson McCain. Please head to Apple Podcasts and leave us some stars and write us a review. We read them, and they make us really happy. Also, if getting string theory wrong really bothered you in this episode, tell us about string theory in those comments after you leave 5 stars!

CARSON: I’m so sorry.

JANIELLE: And we’d love to hear how “plot” is relevant in your life, what have been your plot twists? Were they wonderful? Awful? Awful at first and then wonderful? Tell us @untitleddadproject on instagram or email us [untitleddadproject@spokemedia.io](mailto:untitleddadproject@spokemedia.io). We think that your story matters, and we’d love to hear it.

JANIELLE: Untitled Dad Project is a Spoke media production. We’re produced by Carson McCain, with associate producer Kelly Kolff, and our “sweet baby intern” Lauren Floyd. Special thanks to Peter Brooks, thank you for understanding my obsession with plot, and I’ll read *The French Lieutenant’s Wife*, if you’ll read *Goosebumps*, deal? This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett, and our head of post-production is Will Short.

JANIELLE: The music you heard at the end of today’s episode was composed in response to this chapter by Rat Rios, she also wrote our theme song. Check her out @ratrios on Instagram and SoundCloud. Our gorgeous mountain artwork is @kevincraftco -- hire him for your logos or anything visual.

JANIELLE: Our executive producers are Alia Tavakolian and Keith Reynolds. Thank you for listening. It means the world.

JANIELLE: Like, you know, you listen to podcasts, and like, they're like, "What was that movie with Jim Carrey?" And you're screaming in your car, like, "The Maaaask!" You know, and they can't hear you? I feel like all the things I had to realize today about plot are, like, so obvious to anyone who's listening in their car, but it's a lot harder when it's *your* dead dad. And *your* grief that you haven't looked at. And *your* four years of audio that you're parsing through to figure out where you've been, and where you are, and where you're going, maybe. And...It's a lot harder when it's *your* dead dad. That's our merch.

CARSON: Yeah, that's the one.

JANIELLE: Those are our T-shirts

CARSON: That's the one.

JANIELLE: That's our "Stay Sexy, Don't Get Murdered."  
"It's a lot harder when it's *your* dead dad."

CARSON: Goodbye!

JANIELLE: Goodbye! Dumb, dumb dumb dumb.