

## **EPISODE 1B: INCITING INCIDENT**

JANIELLE: Hey, welcome back to part 2 of episode 1!

CARSON Hey! Here we are!

JANIELLE: There was side A, you've flipped over the cassette tape, this is side B. So last episode, we talked with Robert McKee -

ROBERT: Human beings are capable of anything. Anything you can imagine them doing, or happening to them, has already been done and done in ways you can't imagine. And none of it is melodrama. It's just human.

JANIELLE: And we looked at my story through the lens of the inciting incident. Where do we start? Where was the stasis broken?

ROBERT: Well, the question that the-the event raises: Why am I so upset about the death of a man I didn't even know?

CARSON: And we learned from Robert that your inciting incident was your dad's death, because that is what broke your stasis. You went from, "Oh, I'm fine, it doesn't matter that I didn't have a dad," to, "Oh shit, this matters, and has mattered this whole time". So, Janielle, how did you decide you wanted to activate this?

JANIELLE: I decided I was going to talk to my mother! Talk to my mother.

CARSON: Insanity.

JANIELLE: A crazy idea: actually talk to my mom.

CARSON: And what were your goals in talking to your mom?

JANIELLE: So my goals were to kind of try to do something with the two things that were ringing in my ears the loudest. Um, one: "Oh, you swallowed back obvious questions. You rationalized your life in such a way that you didn't ask obvious questions your whole childhood." And the second was, that "to pretend is a lie." So now that the stasis is broken entirely, I wanted to talk to my mom and see: Okay, can I ask the obvious questions? And can I really look at the pain, and let it in?

CARSON: What are some of these obvious questions?

JANIELLE: Umm... I just don't know what happened! Um... Why did we never talk about this? Why did she tell me it wasn't my story to tell? Talking with Robert, he said, "You might discover that you just didn't really know your mom." There's a lot she hasn't told me, and there's a lot that I just have never asked.

CARSON: Alright, let's get into it!

JANIELLE: Welcome Back to Untitled Dad Project, my metanarrative quest to finally figure out my own story. This is Chapter 1 (part B): Inciting Incident.

[INTRO MUSIC]

[AD BREAK]

JANIELLE: So we're flying home from Thanksgiving, that's what it was. We're flying home from Thanksgiving, and my mom asks me how my projects are going, and I start telling her about Untitled Dad Project. And my mom's just, like, wildly supportive of my work, even, like, if there's swears that she's not a fan of. And so she asks me about how things are going, and I start telling her about how I have some new questions about my childhood, and she says, "Oh, well, we can pull out your baby books and go through

them.” And I carpe diem’ed. Protagonist. Leading lady. And said, “Yes! Let’s do it!” And so we get home, and uh, she pulls out the books, we sit down on the loveseat, and I just pull out my iPhone. And I squished in really close to her on the loveseat, in this tiny little chair and, um, started recording a voice memo on my phone. My mom totally agreed to do an interview, and let me record her. Um, she did not agree, however, to not snack on the organic grapes she had just washed. That’s where she drew the line. That was in her rider. (laughs) So she, you’ll hear her like smacking on grapes, and I think I do too at some point. I’m really sorry, Cat. To set the scene, we’re sitting there in the living room on the love seat, and you’ll hear, like, a chirp periodically, and that’s the sound of the smoke-detector, whose batteries were running out, and had been for months. And my mom’s gonna, will ask me to change those batteries after this interview, before I go home. And we pull out the books, and we open to the first page, and there are photos of me, really little, like first grade at a performance, that apparently my dad went to the dress rehearsal of, and I had no idea.

CAROL: Okay so this...this is a picture of you. And at dress rehearsal, your dad couldn't come to the performance, but he came to the dress rehearsal, and while you were onstage, you left, they were filing off stage, you turned around and came back to stage, and you looked at everyone, and you start blowing them kisses, and curtsy-bowing, and blowing them kisses. And so I knew right there and then that the theatre was, um, in your destiny.

JANIELLE: I would never do that now. I would never break my choreography. So why did my dad go to dress rehearsal?

CAROL: I don't know. He couldn't make it to the regular one.

JANIELLE: So you invited him?

CAROL: Mhmm.

JANIELLE: Well how often would he come to stuff?

CAROL: Well...maybe once every few weeks, when I would invite him to stuff.

JANIELLE: So how would that? Stop eating grapes. (laughs) I mean, I can't hear you if you're eating grapes. Um, what is, so how did that work, though? So you would just, like, call him and tell him that I had stuff going on?

CAROL: Mhmm, yes.

JANIELLE: And then he would show up sometimes, and he wouldn't other times?

CAROL: He normally would show up if I invited him to stuff.

JANIELLE: Yeah?

CAROL: But I always had to be the proactive one. I would invite him to things like your play, your play in, um, where you wore the little yellow, I think that-- Was that in first grade?

JANIELLE: I vividly remember that yellow shirt she's talking about. It had little white daisies around the neck, and the play was Peter Rabbit. And loving that shirt. And I know my dad attended that performance, 'cause I've seen a photo of him and me afterwards. I don't remember all these other instances of recitals that he came or didn't come to. I think maybe I was just too young, but this is sort of the extent of the conversation whenever I've asked about my childhood in the past. When I brought up my dad, we'd get this far, "Oh, I invited him to things sometimes, and he would come

sometimes, or not.” What I’m missing is the answer to a question behind all that, which is: When did he decide to stop being a dad, and start being a guy who could come to recitals sometimes if invited? Yeah, there’s some organizing principle behind there that I’ve never had an answer to. And to be fair, I’ve never directly asked. I’m not even directly asking here. We keep talking, we turn the page, and I find a little Mother’s Day card.

JANIELLE: “Happy first Mother’s Day. Carol, you’re a great mom, I’m proud of you. Love, Brett.” What’s the deal with Brett? Do you remember?

CAROL: Brett was like my boyfriend. We broke up. I dated your dad. And then when I got pregnant, your dad disappeared. Both, actually, both of them did, and then near the end, he said, Brett said, “You don’t have anyone. I want to be-I want to be there for you.” So Brett was actually there for me. And so the first, probably the first year of your life, he got very attached to you. But then, um, I could tell he didn’t love me, but he really cared for you. But he was wonderful to me the first, um, the first year and a half. I mean, he was my labor and delivery coach.

JANIELLE: He was your labor and delivery coach?

CAROL: Uh huh.

JANIELLE: So he was in the room with you when you gave birth to me?

CAROL: Mhmm.

JANIELLE: Oh my god, so he just thought he was my dad.

CAROL: Mhmm. He acted like he was your dad. He was your dad. He was, he just, like, he started becoming, like, thinking-- He just kind of assumed that role, but then it was really str-- It was kind of hard, and--

JANIELLE: How horrible.

CAROL: I got very, very, very close to him, and then--

JANIELLE: Of course you did, he stepped in as your partner.

CAROL: I know.

JANIELLE: Yeah, and he was there for you when you gave birth to me? And you--

CAROL: Mhmm.

JANIELLE: Wow.

CAROL: Yeah.

JANIELLE: How could someone do that?

CAROL: I don't know, he-he was just, I just think God-- I needed someone at that time. But um, people at church were concerned about him. He was-he was very controlling and really manipulative... but I think, there was such a good side to him, he was good with babies and dogs. It just--I just wasn't very good at being treated like a dog or a baby. So-- (laughter)... But yeah, so it was kinda weird.

JANIELLE: That must have been horrible.

CAROL: It was really really hard. It was devastating for me. I was so broken, because he was there for me, and so I fell-I fell back in love with him, and he was such a good dad, and, and it was really, it was kind of like, "Who am I?" I didn't date for years, cause like, who am I going to trust?

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CAROL: Kind of like what you're going through. And so yeah, it was-it was very, very heart-wrenching. I wouldn't let anyone in. I had a wall.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CAROL: So anyway, but you know what...

JANIELLE: You don't have to give me a "but you know what", we can just say that was hard.

CAROL: It was very hard. It was really hard.

JANIELLE: This is something really important I'm realizing about my Mom Character, about my mom, is that: "But, You know what..." that comes at the end of every sad sentence, that takes the pain and does something with it, turns it into something beautiful, so that the pain just doesn't have to be painful, it has some sort of bright-side to it? I really appreciate how in this moment she lets me sit in it with her. She lets it be sad. That feels like a good sign. Although she does try again, um, right here.

CAROL: It was really hard, but God...so, yeah.

JANIELLE: That might be a little hard to hear. That's my mom going, "But God..." and me putting my hand on her shoulder like, "It's okay, Mom, we can just, like, be sad," and her saying, "...so, yeah". God comes up a lot in this interview with my mom. We talked last episode about how this fundamental, defining part of my mom's really strong relationship to her faith and to her church was forged, really defined, by when she found out she was pregnant with me. But for my purposes, for my story's purposes, I'm mostly interested in how God, or this "But God..." functions in the same way as "But, you know..." that gives some sort of hope or positivity or-or purpose to whatever sad, painful thing came before it. It's a really relieving concept that comes up everywhere, not just in Christian or religious stories, this idea that everything works together for a purpose, that pain and suffering has a reason, that the universe or something greater is working such that everything that happens to you happens for some kind of reason. There's no pain that doesn't have some kind of payoff later. And I really love that concept of some ultimate good. I'm-I'm so attracted to it. I always have been. But I think the mandate for me right now, like the lesson I need to learn right now is: Can you let the pain in and just let it be pain? Not try to turn it into something else, not try to point it towards some ultimate good? Can you not relieve it or assign it a sense of purpose? Can you just let it be?

JANIELLE: Back to my mom, we talk more about how she and Brett broke up. *Allegedly* (this is just my mom's side of the story, I didn't ask Brett for a comment, I'm not a journalist, my medium is fictional words and tropes, just a big 'ol "allegedly," but ALLEGEDLY): Brett left her because he fell in love with his secretary, which is a kind of obvious trope to pick for yourself, but whatever Brett. His new girlfriend wasn't into him playing Dad to someone else's kid. He asked if he could still see me on the weekends, but my mom thought that was weird, and has this great little one-liner:



CAROL: My daughter is not the book of the month club. You can't check my daughter out.

JANIELLE: And then he too exits the picture. Bye, pseudo-Dad.

CAROL: Oh, and it was really hard on you in the beginning, because I remember one time, we lived in Valley Ranch, and we went to get gas, and you go, "Mommy? Why isn't Brett right here? Mommy, I want to see Brett. Call Brett. Mommy, call him." And you were broken-hearted, and I was too, but there was nothing I could do about it.

JANIELLE: That must have been so hard.

CAROL: It was really hard.

JANIELLE: I don't remember him at all.

CAROL: Thank god.

JANIELLE: Not even a little bit.

CAROL: Oh thank god, so I mean...

JANIELLE: Wow.

JANIELLE: I thought we were gonna finally hone in on what happened at the very beginning with my Dad Character, but instead I find this whole other new Pseudo-Dad Character, who I don't think ultimately will, like, make the cut of my story, but he totally helps me understand my Mom Character. While I'm in one room coloring, my mom's in another room, getting over a break up of a guy who she thought might be my dad. Might

function as her partner. Like, my mom didn't really date my whole life growing up, and um, I don't know, I'm starting to understand better why. But all of-- as interesting as all of this is to me, um, discovering a new dad, uh, I really want to make sure I don't lose track of Rick, *my Dad Character*.

JANIELLE: How weird, so you had this man who was the father of your child, who kind of disappeared after I was born--

CAROL: Rick didn't come back into my life 'til your second birthday. I really felt like God was urging me, so I went and took you, like, when you were about a year, a year and a half, to your grandfather, Rick-Rick's dad, Fred. So I knocked on the door, and I said, "Hello Fred," and he goes, "Yeah?" And I said, "Um I used to date your son, Rick, and my name is Carol." And I said, "I understand that you're the second, because his name was Claude Frederick Tears the Second, and I said, "I know Rick's the third..." I said-I said, "Would you like to meet the fourth?" I said, "But she's a girl." And-and he goes, "By all means!" So he, well actually--

JAN: "By all means?" That's what he said?

CAROL: Oh yes. He talked very formal, like, Grandpa Tears. "By all means," and he walked over to the car, and I said, "This is Janielle Nicole Kastner."

JANIELLE: Another great line from my mom. "Would you like to meet the fourth?"

CAROL: He came in and invited me in his place, and he goes, "Rick never told me about this," and I said, "Well, this is Janielle." And um--

JANIELLE: So Rick hadn't told his father that he had a-he had a baby?

CAROL: He didn't tell anyone, he felt-he felt ashamed that he had done something wrong, not ashamed of you, but ashamed that-that he had done something wrong. and that he-that he wasn't doing the right thing, I think.

JANIELLE: Mom, so you had this man who, so-so Rick- so you-you told rick, that you were pregnant with me, and he was- and he was involved, and then he wasn't involved?

JANIELLE: I can hear this in my voice, how much I-I didn't know how to ask this question, because this is the scene that I've wanted. The scene where she, my mom tells my dad that she's pregnant, and then... like dot dot dot, right? Like I wanna zoom in on his face in this scene, and-and...and then he does what?

CAROL: I told him I was pregnant with you, and he went, "Oh wow," - And um, then he kind of... I don't know, I think we went out a couple times to eat... Um, and I don't remember everything. It's been a while. But he really was more afraid than anything else...

JANIELLE: She just doesn't remember... And like, coming off the conversation that I have with Robert, there's this feeling of like, "Oh, your mom was a liar." My mom does have, actually, a truly awful memory, and, and... And I don't push her. I should have pushed her, I guess. Like, "Wait, no, try to remember. Can you go back to that scene?" I probably should have pushed her. Um, I'm listening to this and realizing how not good I am at asking the obvious questions. I just hate that I finally asked this question, I finally asked to be shown this scene, and I...I think it still might be a mystery. It's like finally opening the safe and finding that there's nothing inside. There's a note that says, like, "There was stuff here. So sorry. If you had asked earlier, I might have remembered, but now I don't." And that all feels kind of wildly unfair.

CAROL: And so, I met with him a couple times like, “Rick, what are you gonna do? I’m having this baby,” and I realized he just was not gonna to be a part of my life. And, um, what I started to tell you after you were about two years old, and I sued him for back child support, and so, uh, um, I-I filed a paternity suit. So Rick I think was always afraid of me, because whenever he saw me, I was suing him, because he wouldn’t, you know, he wouldn’t belly up to the bar.

JANIELLE: I thought there would be some door slam to explain when he exited the picture, like an ultimatum, a door slam. A “yes or no,” he says “no.” Exit Dad stage right. Instead, he just kinda slips out of her story, as she pivots to child support. I do try again, though, to hone in on-on how he exited the picture. And I also start eating the grapes. Sorry.

JANIELLE: Okay, so wait, going back to you find out you're pregnant, you meet with Rick a couple times. He seems scared and weird, and he doesn't commit to anything or he--?

CAROL: Well initially we-we were gonna get married when I first told him about it.

JAN: And that was his idea?

CAROL: I think it was-we both discussed it, and I think we agreed. I don’t know if it was my idea or his. But he dropped me off at-on the porch like a sack of potatoes. I can’t even explain how I felt. I felt so, like, one day he dropped me off, and I thought, “I’m like, I’m not a sack of potatoes. I’m a human being,” and I thought “It's not gonna work.” Um, so I wouldn't marry him. I kinda refused to marry him, ‘cause I thought, “No, God will provide somebody else, and, and I’ll find-I’ll have a wonderful dad for Janielle,” so um--

JANIELLE: How did it feel then? You felt like--

CAROL: I was pretty alone, I felt really abandoned.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CAROL: But i felt like, "I'm going to--," I read every book on-on babies, you know - I-I took every class I could at HEB Hospital, Hurst-Euless-Bedford Hospital...

JANIELLE: Characteristically, my mom, with all her moxy, throws herself into taking classes at the hospital, learning how to be the best possible pregnant lady she could be, and believing that a Dad is right around the corner. Which led me to another painful question I didn't want to swallow...

JANIELLE: Well I'm curious cause you said, you just knew, you said you prayed, and you were like, "I feel like God's gonna bring, like... God will take care of us, and someone else will be a wonderful dad for Janielle." Well then, Brett stepped in. Did you think that was Brett?

CAROL: Umm, I didn't know. I had hoped, I hoped. I guess I had hoped that he would be-he would, um, be the right one. But--

JANIELLE: How did it feel that that dad never came?

CAROL: How did it feel? I just felt like, "It's okay, God will take care of us, I'm moving on." How did it feel for you that the dad never came?

JANIELLE: Well I never...I never had this idea that I would get a dad.

CAROL: Oh.

JANIELLE: You know, that was not-- I'm thinking about you pregnant, like kinda hoping that the story will get better for you, and this person will enter your life and kind of raise me with you, and he never came...

CAROL: I-I really, I felt like I was equipped to do it. Like, um, I felt like I didn't need-- Alright, so let me just explain-- I felt like I didn't need anyone, I could do this. I just like, you know, like thought, "I can do this. I can do this by myself." I had just became a new Christian, I felt like God would help me, and I just felt like I didn't need anyone.

JANIELLE: Do you hear us registering any kind of loss in that? Like, what do you hear?

CARSON: No, I-I hear no loss registered.

JANIELLE: Like, from either of us?

CARSON: Uh, not now. I hear you trying to ask her if there was loss, and what I hear her saying is, "No. I hoped for a dad for Janielle, I believed that there would be a dad for Janielle, and there wasn't, and that's ok." And then I hear you. I don't hear you register a loss, because I don't hear you having the same expectation as your mom.

JANIELLE: Hmm. My mom hoped for a happy ending, and when she didn't get the-get it, she found a way to make it a happy ending regardless?

CARSON: Yes.

JANIELLE: And I protected myself by not hoping for a happy ending.

[MUSIC]

CAT: I think this is a good time to take a break and hear about some brands that are helping us pay to make this podcast happen.

JANIELLE: Capitalism is the prison from which we make art. Thank you for listening.

[AD BREAK]

JANIELLE: So back to the conversation, back to the interview, uh, we talk some more about dating, and how she closed herself off from men after the whole Brett thing. What the fuck, Brett? Which made me start thinking about my mom, not as my mom, but as just like a woman in the world, which lead to some other obvious questions.

JANIELLE: Did you ever feel really lonely?

CAROL: I think I was, maybe, but I was too busy to be lonely.

JANIELLE: Yeah, you're pretty stressed out, you had a lot to do. Did you ever...? You don't have to answer this question, this is a very personal question. Were you ever just, like...horny?

CAROL: (laughter) At times.

JANIELLE: Yeah! Like did you ever just want a man around? Did you ever just have romantic desire?

CAROL: I-I guess, but in a way I did, and in a way I didn't, because I would be so tired at the end of the day.

CARSON: That was a brave question you just asked.

JANIELLE: I guess it is! I guess it was. Like, somehow I can ask my mom, like, "Hey, what's your personal relationship to your own erotic desire when I was a child?"

(Which I am betting a lot of people have never talked to their moms about.)

But like, "Where is my dad?" and "Can you break down for me why he's not my dad?" is somehow too hard to broach. That's nuts.

JANIELLE: As we start talking about men and partners, I notice another place where loss might be part of our story.

JANIELLE: I wish somebody could have been around to help take care of you.

CAROL: Well.

JANIELLE: That would have been nice.

CAROL: Yeah. I kind of had to take care of Grandma and Grandpa, and stuff. I was always the caretaker.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

CAROL: But I think that I didn't really need to be-- Uh, it would have been nice, but I didn't need it, I didn't actually-- Well maybe I did need it, and I didn't know it. But I don't think I needed it. As I'm old-getting older now, I'm thinking it would be nice to have



someone around to, you know, to take care of me.

JANIELLE: Yeah. What do you think it means that, after all of that not-dating, and I was grown and out of the house, and you still didn't date, and you only started dating someone after Rick died?

CAROL: I don't know, that was the strangest thing, Janielle, because, I-I was at his funeral - or his-his memorial service - well celebration service - whatever they called it - and I just felt, "I'm free." There was a weight that was lifted off of me. "I'm free now." So I don't know - I didn't feel like, realize that I felt encumbered by him, but I felt, like, "Now I'm free. I can have my own life."

JANIELLE: It's really interesting to me, like, the same event can mean such radically different things in two different stories, right? Again, it's not the *what* it's the *how*. The what: my dad dies. For my mom, it opens up this new experience of, like, freedom? And closure? And for me it ripped open a gaping hole I'm still trying to recover from. Like it's making me realize that, like my mom has a story. It's trending towards a happy ending. God has a plan and a purpose for her. All of this is meant to be. Like my mom doesn't lack a story. So for her, this event was just the end of a long chapter, and now she can move on and get on with the story. But I'm at a loss, which led me to my biggest, most obvious question, which is: Why did we never talk about this?

JANIELLE: Do you remember me ever asking about why I didn't have a Dad?

CAROL: I don't recall right off the top of my head. I think I'd always say, "Because you're very special and God is getting-is getting together a really wonderful man to be your daddy--"

JANIELLE: Uh that's--

CAROL: --He's not ready yet."

JANIELLE: That's a weird promise to make to a kid.

CAROL: I don't remember, do you remember what I would say?

JANIELLE: I remember asking you, "What do I say?" I was older, and people were just figuring out where babies came from, but it had not occurred to me that I only had a mommy and not a daddy, and babies come to mommies and daddies. The first time I ever had any sort of confusion... I remember Elizabeth Culberson asked me, "Wait, but how come you don't have a daddy, how did you get here?" And I was like, "That's a great question, Elizabeth," and I was a little older than her, and I was like, "Yeah, it's just like, a thing. But I like, I said something. But I was like, "I don't know, I'm unclear about this." - And I asked you, "What do I say when people ask where my daddy is?" And you said uh, "Just tell them it's not your story to tell."

CAROL: I told you that?

JANIELLE: Yeah. Like it was your story, as to where my daddy was, but it wasn't my story to tell.

CAROL: Oh.... Wow... To ask me?

JANIELLE: Nope. Just-just tell them it's not your story to tell.

CAROL: Wow.

JANIELLE: And I was like, “Okay...” And so, I suppose, I kind of got-kinda got the message that wherever my dad was, it wasn’t really my business.

CAROL: Really?

JANIELLE: Yeah, which is sort of the whole premise of this art project, right? It’s like, “Okay, well let’s assume it is my story to tell, now how may I tell it?”

CAROL: It is your story to tell absolutely. I didn’t even realize I said that to you.

JANIELLE: Mom you were probably in between like paying a bill, and cooking a meal, and whatever, and it probably just came out of your mouth. You probably said some really brilliant stuff that you read about in books, about where-where my daddy was, or how-how special I was, and how not having a dad didn’t, you know, like you probably said some brilliant stuff, I don’t remember any of it...

CAROL: I don’t either.

JANIELLE: Do you know, like, that’s all i remember, is you telling me, “It isn’t your story to tell.” That’s it. Isn’t that crazy?

CAROL: Wow.

JANIELLE: The delivery nurse said, “Janielle was very alert.”

JANIELLE: That’s me immediately turning the page and reading the delivery nurse’s note on a little baby card.

JANIELLE: So if my two jobs were to ask the obvious questions and let the pain in... This is, like, a huge regression... Like falling flat on my face. I didn't know this when I was having the conversation, but listening to this, my mom has a realization! She has no idea that she told me that it wasn't my story to tell, and she also doesn't realize that we never talked about it. And before that realization can even sink in, I so quickly tap dance us over into what a great mom she is, and how she probably did a great job, and I just don't remember it, and let's turn the page and read the next fun little card. I just... Uhh, I'm so bad at this. I'm not good at this yet. If I'm gonna be a protagonist who can, like, actually look at it and let the pain in, I'm gonna need to practice asking hard questions and not...doing this. What do you hear in that?

CARSON: I hear that it is far easier for you to let the pain in for you, than for you to let the pain in for your mom.

JANIELLE: Hmm, yeah.

CARSON: But, of course.

JANIELLE: Yeah... Yeah.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: Shortly after this interview with your mom (which was several years ago now), we went to my home studio to debrief, and you brought up a question that had actually come up in the Robert interview that you hadn't asked -

JANIELLE: The second one I didn't ask her was, um, why didn't she get an abortion. Just I've heard my mom talk about that so much about how pro life she was, um. She described to me... This she's told me in detail. We never talked about what happened

when she told my dad she was pregnant, but we did talk about this story. How she'd been talking to her roommate at the time, who was, they were talking, debating like prolife, pro-choice, whatever, and then um, her roommates boyfriends said, "Are you telling me if you got pregnant today that you wouldn't consider um aborting your baby?" And she says, "No. Absolutely not." And then she said she felt like that was God giving her a test. And then when, I guess when he heard her say that, he decided that-that she could be suddenly surprise pregnant with me. I uh, it's - um - my mom really likes that story. So I didn't really feel the need to ask. I just know that she never... I guess the question I'm afraid to ask is: Did my dad suggest it?

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: I mean, I assume he did. I don't know. Does it matter? Ha.

CARSON: Does it matter to you?

JANIELLE: Oh. That's a better question, isn't it? Hmm. Does it make me a bad feminist to say a little?

CARSON: No.

JANIELLE: You'd like to think that your existence... you know. I can - hmm. I'm reaching for something, and I hope it's not a cop-out. I hope it's not a "but you know". But you know, I have one parent who wanted me the minute she knew I existed. And that's something. That's not nothing. I reserve the right to have a "But, you know" for myself. Even if I give my mom a hard time.

CARSON: What's important to me, too, when I hear you say that is, that's not a lie, that's not somebody crafting a narrative to make you feel better. That's very true.

JANIELLE: No, that's true. That is something I know to be true about my mom. About Mom Character.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: So at this point of the interview we're out of grapes. And um we finish looking through the baby books, and I thank my mom for her time, for letting me, you know, just jump in with a recording, but then one more thing occurs to her. It's the-the miracle story that I alluded to Robert, um earlier. I-I mentioned it in passing in our interview. How my mom found the church after she was pregnant with me. And of all the things that we-we haven't talked about over the course of my childhood, this is-this is a story that she's told me a lot.

CAROL: Oh, I was really questioning when I was pregnant, like, "Why? How come?" you know? Like - And I was at church, and I went up, and this-for prayer, and this woman had this beautiful Jesus pin, it said "Jesus" in diamonds - it looked like diamonds. And I looked at her eyes, she was really tall. And I looked in her eyes, and I think she was like an angel. I said, "I have some questions." She goes, and even before I could tell her I was pregnant, she goes, "You have to stop questioning, God chose you to be her mother, that she will have the gift of Daniel." And that God had a plan and purpose for your life, and he chose me to be your mother, and she said to stop questioning, that it was, it was like a blessing, God was blessing me, that he looked-and looked all around and picked me to be your mom. I didn't even tell her the story, and she was just telling me all this stuff.

JANIELLE: I've heard that story a lot. That's one of the most important scenes for my mom. Listening back to all of this, I'm getting the sense that my mom thinks that she's told me all the important scenes, Because these are the important scenes to her. The

miracle scenes, where she passes the test, and God gives me to her, and she doubts, and she finds her faith, and she walks in, and a maybe-angel-lady says that she was chosen. Like, these are the important scenes. She can recall them with vivid detail. What matters less to her is, you know, what my dad looked like when she told him, when my dad wrote himself out of the picture, like all of that stuff about my dad, all that pain is like a - an expository montage. You know, like the first 5 minutes of Up, like yup, yup, yup. snip through all those images. Don't need to dwell on them. We get the point. Because the point of the story is this other thing: that you were a miracle. That God gave you to me. That's a beautiful story. And I actually, I really don't believe in condescending other people's miracles. That's my mom's miracle, and that's hers. I couldn't take that miracle away from her even if I tried. That's not what this is about. I think what's wrong is that, I just co-opted my mom's story, the story of being a miracle. I didn't figure out mine. I just inherited hers. And so I guess, what this is, is me saying bye to that story. The one where I'm the miracle, where I'm the happy ending. Like, when you hear people talk about reclaiming a narrative, you know I think of it as like a triumphant thing? But for me, like, reclaiming the right to my own story, my own narrative is like saying bye to something where I was like this beautiful miracle? And instead saying yes to a story where I might just be... a sad little girl. With regular pain, because she didn't have a dad. It feels a little bit like a downgrade, you know? That's not what I expected... But I'd rather not pretend. I'd rather have an honest story. I want to know my little regular story. I can still hear my mom tell hers, you know? I can hold onto that. I'm glad she has it, even if I don't anymore.

CARSON: Let's take another break. Thanks for listening.

[AD BREAK]

CARSON: Before we finish up, there's a few things that I want to point out with this activation. The first being: Part of what you wanted to accomplish with this activation

was asking your mom some hard questions, and I really think that you did that. I know that there were times when you wished you would have asked more, or more clearly, but this was not a complete failure. You were practicing asking your mom these hard questions.

JANIELLE: I guess if we're grading on a curve, then yeah. If you adjust for inflation, yeah, it was a start.

CARSON: Adjust for the genetic family system's inflation, yes.

JANIELLE: Sure, sure. It was, it was a start. It was a start.

CARSON: And, in addition, the things you feel like you failed at, we can get your mom back in the studio. We can ask her these things again.

JANIELLE: Yes, I know where she lives. We can bring my mom back in, and I can get, like, a little better at asking hard questions. And she's demonstrated to me that she's not afraid to participate in this project, nor will this project break her.

CARSON: The next thing I wanna point out to you is a moment where I think you really successfully pushed back in this interview with your mom. You are saying, "This part's your story, this part's my story," in a really beautiful way, and it's the moment where you and your mom are talking about what the "gift of Daniel" is (that the angel-lady talked about).

JANIELLE: What do you think the-what do you think the "gift of Daniel" is she was talking about? What's the gift of Daniel?



CARSON: Well, Daniel was very wise, um-- I guess that's something for you to something to research. What is the gift of Daniel? And um--

JANIELLE: Daniel interpreted dreams of the King. Is this right? - (gasp) - No, I'm thinking of Joseph!

CAROL: You're thinking of Joseph. Daniel did something to help the king in the very beginning. Maybe we should look that up.

JANIELLE: Man, I'm conflating all my old testament dudes. Someone tricked the King into issuing Daniel to death--?

CAROL: Yes! Because-because--

JANIELLE: Oh Daniel would pray, ahhhhh, Daniel's the one who would pray! - Okay, let's just google "gift of Daniel." The gift of prophecy?

CAROL: Maybe you have, I - I have a prophetic gifting, so it seems like it would go to you...

JANIELLE: Here we go, I don't want to get saved today, internet, I just want to know about this guy. Who was Daniel the prophet?... "They delivered themselves by their righteousness--" I don't feel very righteous. "--knowledge skill and understanding from God."

CAROL: God's given you knowledge, skill, and understanding. The number one way to influence people is through plays, movies--

JANIELLE: I don't think the number one way to influence people is through plays. Not that many people go to plays anymore, Mom, unless it's Hamilton.

CAROL: Movies, plays, um, yeah...

JANIELLE: Movies, probably, yeah.

CAROL: Entertainment. And writing books, and God's given you that gift.

JANIELLE: You think art is prophetic?

CAROL: It can be.

JANIELLE: What makes art prophetic?

CAROL: Well you can write things, you can make it a-a story, a future-a futuristic event, makes-makes people think.

JANIELLE: Mmm.

CAROL: I just believe that God has you here for such a time as this - that I think your art is just the means, the vehicle.

JANIELLE: For what?

CAROL: For you to influence people back to God. Oh this woman said, her name is - uh, another woman after you were born, she was like a secretary at the church, uh she said, "I see a halo over her" - and she said, when you, after you were born, she goes -

“She will lead thousands to the Lord.”

JANIELLE: Is it enough if I give thousands of people...? Is it enough do you think if I make thousands of people feel loved and a little more known?

CAROL: I guess so--

JANIELLE: Is that enough?

CAROL: I think so, that's between you and God, but I don't know if--

JANIELLE: If those thousands of people never answer an altar call, or never --

CAROL: You don't have to answer an altar call, you just have to really... I think you just have to accept him as your lord and savior and ask him, you know, to come into your life.

JANIELLE: I know, but I'm saying if thousands of people experience my work, and...and they just feel, for a moment, so loved, just so known and loved, and-and-and not alone, and like they're for-for a moment, for an hour they're surrounded by light. Is that enough?

CAROL: I think so. But they could be surrounded by light the rest of their life, if they so choose.

CARSON: I love that moment. I love that so much, because I see you trying to carve out a space for your own narrative in the midst of the narrative that she has for you.

JANIELLE: Yeah, it's a mini stand-off of narratives, isn't it? Can she hold her narrative where I'm a miracle, and can I hold space for my narrative where I'm not a miracle that looks exactly like she was told I would? Yeah, inside that moment I hear a question which is: Will you still love me if I'm a miracle that looks different than you were promised I would? And I think the answer in my mom's case is yes.

CAROL: ... and I'm proud of you, Sweetheart. And I just...I love you, and I'm very proud of you, and-and I thank God that He chose me to be your mom. Because, this has been my greatest destiny, not my careers, not my teaching, it's just being your mom.

JANIELLE: Thanks, Mom.

CAROL: You're welcome.

JANIELLE: I'm really glad you're my mom.

CAROL: Yeah.

JANIELLE: I'm glad God chose you to be my mom.

JANIELLE: Maybe my mom is right, and my art is supposed to save your eternal souls. But right now I need my art to save my own soul. I need it in that put-your-own-oxygen-mask-on-first kind of way. Maybe that tug that I felt in that pit of grief, maybe that wasn't a capital-C call to a grand adventure, maybe it was a much smaller call to notice where I was, that grief, and decide that it matters. To decide that my story matters. To decide that not knowing parts of yourself, it matters. To tell a story at all, to try to tell a story at all, is to first decide that it's worth telling. And maybe if I do this, if I try to do this all the way, you'll listen and decide your story is worth telling, too. I

just think we owe it to ourselves to try. I have decided to *decide* that my story is worthy. Let's figure out how along the way.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: Next time on Untitled Dad Project: Janielle learns how to embrace the soap opera world that she suddenly found herself in. Chapter 2: Genre.

TAYLOR ANNE: Say whatever you want to say. Like, give yourself the freedom to say it all and leave no stone unturned...

JANIELLE: I didn't come to pay my respects. I came to get answers

TAYLOR ANNE: ... 'cause I think that's a hallmark of the soap opera world, too. It's like, nothing is off limits or out of bounds. And...and nothing is too ridiculous, either.

JANIELLE: (singing) My life is crazy. I'm sitting in a room about to record a soap opera scene with a man I don't know...

CARSON: We'll see you then.

JANIELLE: Untitled Dad Project is co-hosted by me, Janielle "Jan" Kastner, and Carson "Cat" McCain. If you're intrigued by this work at all, please head over to Apple Podcast and leave us just a constellation of stars and write a review letting us know what's intriguing you so far. That input helps way more than you'd think. Like, a lot.

JANIELLE: And we'd really love to hear how the theme of "Inciting Incident" is relevant in *your* life. What are the events that have disrupted your stasis, and how are you dealing with it? Let us know at [@untitleddadproject](https://twitter.com/untitleddadproject) on social media or email us at [untitleddadproject@spokemedia.io](mailto:untitleddadproject@spokemedia.io). We think your story matters, and we'd really love to hear it.

JANIELLE: Untitled Dad Project is a Spoke Media Production. We're produced by Carson McCain, with associate producer Kelly Kolff, our "sweet baby intern" Lauren Floyd.

JANIELLE: Special thanks to my mom. I love you. Thanks for loving me no matter what, and I will get you some more grapes. If you want more of my mom's work, too bad, she's not famous, she's my mom. But if you know any born-again single dads in your network, slide into my DMs.

JANIELLE: 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 especially in response to this chapter by Rat Rios. She also wrote our theme song "Flora vs. Fauna". Check her out @ratrios on Instagram, and Rat Rios on SoundCloud.

JANIELLE: And our executive producers are Alia Tavakolian and Keith Reynolds.

JANIELLE: Thank you for listening to this. It means the world.