

SAM: Hello, Ghost Family. Welcome to *Family Ghosts*.

*[music: FG Theme]*

Last summer, I went out to LA and spent a few days with a writer and storyteller whose work I have admired for years. His name is David Crabb, and when I got to his apartment, he told me this story from a couple years ago, when he was feeling really depressed. A family member named Charlie had died, and this happened right at the time that David and his husband had to move out of their house. They didn't have very much notice about having to move - didn't even have time to look for a new place - so they were temporarily staying in a friend's studio apartment in East Hollywood while she was out of town. It was a small apartment, but it had a big picture window, which meant she had a perfect view of the building across the street - which happened to be the Church of Scientology.

*David: I could just like lean in a window in my very depressed state and watch the Scientologists in and out of the big blue building for hours on end. And it was really like watching an ant farm of human beings.*

That's David. And at the time this was happening, David's husband Jack was working a day job, which meant David spent hours on end alone in this studio apartment, and he told me he would just stare out the window.

*David: And it was so bizarre watching it, watching them. They were like extras in a movie with no lead. Do you know what I mean? Like Tom Cruise was not coming to set that day. They were just trapped. And the crazy thing about it is that from my perspective, I would look at them and be like, ugh, that must be nice. I would watch them and think, oh, this is how people join cults. Like from this place of the, I have nothing, you know?*

At the end of the day, David's husband Jack would come home from work.

*David: He would be like, how was your day? And I would express to him all of my Scientology observations. I was, at this point, um smoking and eating a fair amount of weed. So sometimes I could go on in a very long winded way that would become very emotional and punctuated by tears. And he was like, Babe, I think that you*

*need to go talk to someone.*

So David called this service that recommends various options for people looking for support in times of grief. And they told him about this support group that met in Venice, which was a short drive from where they were staying. And a few days later, David drove out to this non-descript house in a quiet suburban neighborhood, full of sunlight and palm trees. A middle-aged woman greeted him and invited him in - she served him carrots and Chips Ahoy cookies on a paper plate. Everything seemed pretty normal - until he met the group's facilitator.

*[music in]*

*David: She had blown out red hair, kind of like an amethyst-y necklace was in like sort of gauzy diaphanous clothes*

As the meeting got underway, David started glancing around the room at his surroundings.

*David: It wasn't just the four of us. There were also many other beings in the room. Um, do you know those sort of collapsible play pens that you could put babies in at parties, that you kind of, there were four or five of those and they were full of no less than a total of 15 under two pound elderly Chihuahuas, four or five of which were wearing dresses.*

The meeting started, and as the other people were sharing their stories, David was starting to have second thoughts about being there.

But then, finally, the woman with the amethyst necklace turned to him and said, "All right David - why don't you tell us about what you've been going through?"

*David: And boy did I. I felt like my skull kinda cracked in half and just lava poured out. Like I just, I got so emotional and intense that at one point I looked down and there was a little dog in my lap. I hadn't put it there. Like I didn't start my weeping with the dog in my*

*lap. I guess one of the women was like, he's really losing it. Let's put a little dog. And it was this tiny little chihuahua with big milk eyes in this purple, like little lavender, like tutu dress thing. And I just remember looking down at it like I was coming up back from a black out and the dog looking up at me as if to be like, this fucked up isn't it? Isn't it weird here?*

*[music ends]*

*David: And when I was done, the woman who ran the group, she's like, you know, you keep talking about how it's just a dog. Don't, don't do that to yourself. Let yourself mourn the dog. Don't try to like line that loss up against other kinds of more worthy losses. Right?*

Ok friends, so I buried the lead here a little bit. That family member of David's who died - Charlie? Charlie was David's dog. But I didn't want to tell you that right away because the thing is - when David was telling *me* the story, I knew Charlie was a dog, but I kept forgetting because the way David talks about dogs is unlike the way I've ever heard anyone else talk about them.

And in the moment of telling his story that day at the house in Venice, David had this feeling - maybe this group really understood him.

*David: So, you know, I'm kind of like coming back to the room holding this little dog. When I notice, I hear one of the women refer to the dog as her daughter. And I tell her, I say, oh that's, that's so funny that you call your dog your daughter.*

Finally, it seemed, David had found a group of people who got it: for David, Charlie was family.

But, then...

*David: She says, oh no, no, no, no, no. I mean, I mean she, she was my daughter like 200 years ago. She was my human daughter. And I'm like, Whoa, okay. And then it, and then as I'm still processing that, a few minutes later, one of them starts talking about, well, you know, I mean, th-- the visitations are the thing that really keep me going. And I'm like, what? What, what are the visitations? And then she's like, Oh yeah, you know, talking*

*about how she comes through your washer and dryer. And then another woman is like well for me it's the lights. When the lights go on and off in the hallway. And then they're all sort of talking about like, the dogs, the souls of their dogs are essentially like alive in the like electronic components of their houses. And I just kind of shut down for the next hour of the meeting cause I didn't know how to talk to them about losing Charlie in their language.*

When David got back to his friend's studio apartment that night, Jack was out and David was exhausted - he was feeling more helpless than ever.

*David: and I laid down in bed to go to sleep and I was probably in bed for like 10 minutes when all of a sudden the white noise machine by her bed just went [white noise] and came on and I sat up in bed and I said out loud, I said, Charlie? Like I said it to the room. And I'm like, I'm like sitting here thinking that like the ghost of my dog is alive in this like strange woman's like white noise machine. And like that can't be true.*

David actually ended up telling me the stories of three different dogs that have been a huge part of his life. And over the course of the nineteen previous episodes of this show, from cults to corpses to Chinese food, I've heard plenty of stories about the conscious and unconscious ways our families define us. But I'd never heard one quite like David's.

From Spoke Media, and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this is episode twenty: *A Boy in a Story*. We'll be right back.

### ***[AD BREAK 1]***

David was born in San Antonio, Texas, and by the time he was two, his parents were divorced. So David spent most of his time with his mom, Gerri, and Gerri worked at the mall, where she had three jobs.

*David: At one point she worked in an arcade, and a maternity store and the rape crisis center, which was also in the mall because Texas.*

*[music in]*

Other than the mall, David and Gerri were kind of the only reliable presence in each other's lives. Gerri was barely making enough money to keep them afloat, and she had a string of bad boyfriends, so she and David moved around a lot.

*David: I counted it once, I lived in, I think it's 19 places.*

But finally, when David was in eighth grade, it seemed like they'd landed somewhere permanent. Gerri started dating a guy named Mike.

*David: And Mike had a two bedroom house with a yard. And he was this really cool guy with like a goatee and like long hair. He looked like he was a member of Credence Clearwater Revival. And he smoked weed like a member of Credence Clearwater Revival too. Um, I remember at night the - his bedroom at the end of the hall would smell a certain way and I remember my mom once over dinner, I was like, what's that smell? And one mother was like, water bed de-moisturizer. And I was like, what?*

This was actually a plausible explanation - Mike did, in fact, have a king-size water bed. And Mike seemed excited to bring David and Gerri into his world. He even bought David his own twin-size waterbed. But, even better, Mike had two dogs - a pair of German Shepherds named Brandy and Ginger.

*[music in]*

Brandy and Ginger were sisters - and while Ginger spent most of her time sitting patiently at the feet of whoever seemed most likely to give her table scraps at dinner, Brandy had a little bit darker energy - she was a little mysterious, and she wore a muzzle.

*David: ...and it was weird being a kid in this new environment, kind of getting used to the prospect of this new like, you know, dad figure possibly, maybe soon to be stepfather if they got married. And having this sort of whole process watched by this dog with a muzzle, you know what I mean? Like sitting, having dinner, being, having someone explain to me about the waterbed de-moisturizer, kind of like laughing. They're like my family. And Ginger's sitting next to me letting me pet her as I eat a steak. And then in the corner, like literally like behind a drape, blowing in a breeze and some like terrible like canine, like fatal attraction kind of moment, just this muzzled dog like glaring at me.*

But a few months after Gerri and David moved in, Mike decided it was safe to take Brandy's muzzle off. Still - David couldn't shake the feeling that Brandy was watching him - particularly late at night, after Mike and his mom went to bed.

*David: I would stay up and watch like Cinemax, especially. I was at that age where like after 11, it became Skinemax, you know what I mean?*

One night, David was up late watching Skinemax, and he went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. But before he could make it to the sink, out of nowhere, Brandy appeared.

*David: She walked right up to me and she opened her jowls and she bit the inside of my thigh. I mean it hurt, don't get me wrong, but there was no, she didn't puncture my jeans and I just started saying, Mike, Mike, Mike. And the door opened and he came in and he clapped and he was like, Brandy. And he yelled at her*

Brandy retreated into the corner, and the next few nights, things went back to normal - or at least as normal as they could be for David, who still felt like Brandy was eyeing him from behind the drapes. About a week later, David was up late watching TV again, and again, he dared to venture into the kitchen. And when he got there, Brandy was waiting.

*David: She strips her teeth and starts growling at me. And I'm sort of like frozen like you know, just like there with like an empty glass. All I wanted was water being like, oh my god, I'm going to die right now. And I'm, I'm, I say, I start saying Mike, Mike, Mike. Mike comes down the hall and from the angle that where Mike walks up behind Brandy and he's facing me and he looks at me and says, David, don't move. And I remember my first thought was like, me?! Like me not move?! Like your dog's about to murder me. And he very like slowly points and right in front of my feet is this black scorpion. It - big one of these big like Texan southern - like they come out in the heat like oily black, like you know, like to, you know, a substantial size. And you know, he proceeded, you know, walk around Brandy and smash it and throw it out. And the minute that he like came around the dog and smashed it, she just like relaxed, you know.*

This incident completely upended David's feelings about Brandy. Maybe she didn't hate him. Maybe she was just trying to let him know there was a scorpion in the house.

*David: That night I went to bed and I got in my twin water bed and at one point I was laying there and I felt like this like wave under me. You know, the, the, the weight of someone getting in your water bed? And I was like, what? And Brandy got up on the water bed and laid at the foot of water bed. And she proceeded to sleep in my water bed every night after that.*

About nine months into Gerri's relationship with Mike, things started to unravel.

*David: Mike's interest I think, uh, went beyond weed into other things. And one night, um, and, and one, uh, one night I heard them in their room really, really fighting and it was intense and it was, it was, you know, it wasn't like physically violent, but it was, it was heated. And I just sat in my room, you know, with both of the dogs, like they went to be with me. And you know, at that point I had done this thing where like, I had kind of built like my dream teenage room and my awesome like nuclear family house. My whole room was like, you know, all the greats of the air, Taylor Dayne, you're Rick Astley, you're Nana Cherry, your Paula Abdul, all of it. And I just remember sitting in my room like my perfect room with my dogs, like hearing them fight and being like, oh, you know? I remember even at that age being like, I'm gonna lose this. And it was a few nights after that fight where my mom woke me up one night and she said, um, she whispered. She was like, we have to go. And I was like, what's happening? And she's like, we just, we need to go.*

David remembers packing frantically - literally throwing clothes and books into garbage bags.

*David: I remember I packed up all my stuff and we - I looked back at my room, you know, that I had like built over nine months and it was, you know, this place I really loved and we walked to the carport to get in the car. And when we opened the door and we looked and my mom had opened the doors to the Chevette cause we'd been putting stuff in it and in the passenger and the driver's seat, were Brandy and Ginger and they were just staring at us. And at this point I was crying, my mom was crying. And I don't know if you've ever tried to tell a very intuitive, smart animal like a dog that everything is okay in a playful way as you're weeping to get them out of a car. But they did not want to get out*

*of the car and they were, they were sensing us. They're dogs, you know, and they were - they didn't want to get out of the car. And it took a really long time to also keep this quiet, you know, to quietly, in the driveway, the car port. And we've finally got them out of the, out of the car and you know, we got in the Chevette and you know, we put them in the house and we drove away. I was like, this is, I'm not, I'm not, I'm probably not going to see these dogs again. And that was, and that was, that was really hard.*

*[music ends or shifts]*

He was right - but eventually, Charlie came along.

*DAVID: He has one big black eyebrow over one of his eyes, like half Martin Scorsese face kind of, and he walks up to us and he's just looking like, so inquisitively like, who are you guys like I heard about you.*

That's coming up after the break, when our story continues.

***[AD BREAK 2]***

In his twenties, David got, as he puts it, the hell out of Texas, and moved to New York. He was living in Brooklyn, working at a gallery, bartending, and spending his free nights exploring the nightlife.

*David: I was sort of like the guy that you would see at like the, the electro-clash Williamsburg like gay club. Like I would be doing the thing that all the guys did. You would wear your bomber jacket, you'd lean on something and kind of sneer with a cocktail and a cigarette.*

As much fun as he was having, though, David still felt a little lost.

*David: I was kind of like all talk and no walk. I was deeply insecure about intimacy and really inexperienced. I mean I was still kind of the same like goth kid I was when I was little.*

One night, David was sneering at a bar in his bomber jacket, and this really good-looking guy walked in.

*David: This like very sort of, I mean corn fed looking tall, very handsome with this baby face and like prematurely salt and pepper hair and his name was Jack.*

Things got off to a bumpy start.

*David: I mean, Jack and I's dating was like me getting hammered, like liquid courage, liquid courage, liquid courage, and then getting home to like the pullout sofa where that he shared in this like crappy Bushwick apartment with his roommate and like passing out.*

Eventually, they got fed up with each other, and called it quits. And it might've ended there. But about a year later, David was living in the East Village, and by this time, David had discovered he had Crohn's disease. So he was trying to take care of himself a little better - work out more, drink less. But the drinking part was tricky. And one night, he bumped into Jack at a bar.

*David: cut to two hours later, liquid courage, smashed, sucking the life force from each other's faces on the patio of this bar.*

But this time, things went differently.

*David: He was like, I'm not going to do this with you again. I will meet you for a day date. I was like, I was drunk I was like a day date?! He's like, yeah, we're going to go on a day date.*

They agreed on the following Tuesday afternoon - and when they showed up at the restaurant, they were a little awkward and formal with each other - this was the first time they'd hung out sober. On top of that, the vibe at the restaurant was a little weird - there were pink construction paper cut-outs and decorations all over the place.

*David: And as the waitress walks up she has like a stack. She'd just gotten menus from the printer and they're all shades of pink and red and she looks at us and she cocks her head to the side. The way that straight girls do when they see gay guys they think are a*

*cute couple and she proceeds to say Happy Valentine's Day you guys. And we had no, we had not nary an idea that it was Valentine's Day.*

Soon enough, David and Jack were living together back in Brooklyn. And for the first time since Mike's house, David felt like he'd finally found a real home...almost. There was one ingredient missing - and so one day, David and Jack went to this local animal rescue called Brooklyn Badass. They had seen an orange dog on the Brooklyn Badass website and thought he looked like the perfect addition to their little family.

But when David and Jack showed up at Brooklyn Badass, things didn't go the way they planned.

*David: You know, I love dogs. This dog was an asshole. Like I don't know how else to...he was not vibing with us and as we were petting him, like not vibing with us suddenly morphed into like aggression. He, he started growling and that like rumble waned his chest. He stripped his teeth and I kind of backed up and I realized he wasn't looking at us. He was actually looking past us...*

*[music in - Charlie's Theme]*

*...and Jack and I turned and kind of walking up to us, not on a leash just seemingly like free reign in the place was this like little white dog. He's maybe like 11, 12 pounds and he's hobbling because he's not using one of his hind legs. Um, his entire butt is shaved. It's like just like pink with like a big Frankenstein scar down it and the scar is above like the side of his pelvis where he's not using his hind leg and he's Kinda like hopping over. He has one big black eyebrow over one of his eyes, like half Martin Scorsese face kind of, and he walks up to us and he's just looking like, so inquisitively like, who are you guys like I heard about you. And as he's doing this, this, this chow thing is just like literally like [growls] stripping its teeth and this little dog just kind of looks at the dog like, Ugh, I didn't know you'd be here anyways guys. What's going on? Like this little dog does not give a rat's ass. And, and Jack always talks about how I looked up at him as if to say, well, this is it. Well this, we're done. We're done here. We've found the dog.*

Everything about this little dog was perfect - except for the name.

*David: And when we went up to meet the, the, the people that ran the rescue, we were*

*like, we think this is the dog we want. They were like, Big Daddy? Y'all want Big Daddy? And later that, I was like, Jack, we're going to change this dog's name. So we named him Charlie.*

Right away, David felt this kinship with Charlie. When they got Charlie, David was pretty sick with Crohn's - he was having these intense bouts of abdominal pain and roving arthritis - sometimes he felt like he could barely get out of bed. But once Charlie was in the picture, that all started to change.

*David: I love walking places with Charlie. Like he was just, he had a lot of spunk. Um, within the first week or two we had him, he started using that hind leg. You know I really did feel sometimes like I'd be out with him and I just had an extra kick in my step, you know? And you know, I don't think that dogs are magical in the sense that you get one and they heal you. But the timing was kind of amazing. I started to gain weight and get better from my Crohn's flare up. Just as you know, Charlie started to grow hair over that pink patch and use his hind leg.*

One day a few months in, David took Charlie for a walk around Brooklyn. It was the first warm afternoon of the spring - the sun was out, and people were finally venturing out of their apartments for the first time in months. And at one point, they were walking past a Thai restaurant, and there was this somber-looking guy in a gold chain, kind of brooding in the shade - wearing a big pair of headphones. As David and Charlie passed him, the guy took off his headphones and started staring at them. David wasn't sure what he wanted.

*David: ...and he looks at me, and then he looks at Charlie and it's kind of like his whole sort of like persona changed. And he lit up and in this sweet accent, he literally, he almost kinda like stopped us and he put his hand down and he, and he pet Charlie. He said, oh, this dog, this is the dog of a boy from a story!*

Now, something you need to understand about David is that he's an artist - he's constantly engaged in this ongoing process of self-analysis, finding new ways of telling and re-telling his own story, both to himself and to the world. In 2015, David published a memoir of his days as a gay goth kid in suburban Texas - dropping acid and running naked through cemeteries - it's a really good book. But

now that David had Charlie, David was beginning to realize how much dogs were the key to telling the truest version of his story - both figuratively, and in Charlie's case, literally.

*David: Charlie literally wrote Bad Kid, my first memoir, with me. And he, he likes stillness and rest. So when I would write, you know, as playful as he was when I write, he was like, he was like, oh, we're going to write. And he would lay on the couch next to me, um, sort of on his side with his spine, like against my, my thigh.*

David and Charlie spent hours in what David started calling "writing position."

With the return of his health, and the arrival of Charlie in their lives, David and Jack decided to make another big change. They got married, and they packed up their life in New York and moved west, trading in their cramped Brooklyn attic apartment for this sun-drenched house in LA, complete with a fig tree growing in the yard, and a baby grand piano for Jack to play.

*[music in: Jack]*

*David: the three of us had this sort of beautiful special thing that was kind of like this crazy Eden. I mean, we picked figs. There was a barbecue, there was like a, a vegetable garden. I would go and cut, like, you know, I would cut, um, salad and like from the garden, you know, it just felt very, um, you know, as like Charlie, like just like laid in a corner. It, It was, it was, it was beautiful.*

And there was more good news. Jack's sister and her five-year-old son Leo announced that they too would be moving to LA from Pennsylvania.

*David: Which was really exciting -- the idea that we were going to have like family here.*

*[piano music fades]*

One morning not long after they arrived in Eden - a glass broke in the kitchen.

*David: And we're cleaning up glass when this email comes in and it turns out*

*that our landlords are selling this house that we'd only lived in for three or four months and we're being evicted. And as this is happening, I hear a little yelp in the living room and I look and Charlie is on his back and he's just in a full locked seizure. Like foam, just foam pouring out of his mouth.*

The seizures began to recur - and before long, David lost track of how many times he'd had to drive Charlie back and forth to the vet.

*David: Some of the times Charlie would go to the hospital and he would just be there for a while. They'd be like, we need him overnight. And then the next morning they'd be like, something's wrong. We need him another night. And then they'd be like, he should probably stay here for four or five days. And you know, as all of this is happening, you, you are confronted with just the, the heartbreak of it. Because a dog doesn't know, know know, what's happening to them. They can't, I want to believe they can't like fear for their mortality that way. But you can't help but think of their suffering. And like you know, for a human, you get to tell a human, all of these tests are really going to hurt. You're going to throw up for two months because of this drug, but don't you want to paint again? Like, you know, don't you want to see your child go to college and you know, what would you tell a dog?*

Within a few weeks, David was so distraught he couldn't write. With Jack out of the house during the day, he spent all his time alone, worrying that whatever was going on with Charlie was about to get worse.

*David: I can't express to you the amount of time and, and days this, it felt endless. Having all of these people that you're paying money say it could be this or this or this and we don't know. And we'll know next weekend, then next week would come and we don't know. But there's now this additional symptom, there's more seizures. Um, he seems to not have a sense of smell. He seemed to be temporarily blind for a minute. There were all of these issues. It was being in such a high state of anxiety that like I s-- I would have moments where I would lose track of what I was anxious about.*

Finally, the phone rang one day, and Charlie's doctor told David they'd figured out what the problem was. It wasn't good news. Charlie had a brain tumor, and he needed to be admitted to the hospital long-term for an intense round of radiation. David started spending most of his nights at the

hospital with Charlie.

*David: All the people at the Animal Center, they knew me. They would make it like date night. Like they all loved Charlie. There was this one woman who really loved Charlie, she was so sweet and one time she came in and you know Charlie had like a cone or in a, and the bells and like electrodes and was shaved in three spots and had a IV in his ankle and this nurse came in and she was like, Oh Charlie. I was like, I know. And she's like, he looks pretty rough, huh? And I said, yeah. She said, I hope you don't mind, but I want you to know that um I dance with him at night. And I'm like, what? And she said, yeah, like I play Etta James in the back and we like we, we dance together.*

She asked David what Charlie's favorite foods were, and the three of them started having little dinner parties.

*David: I would just have dinner with him and I would like sit on the floor and he would go into like writer position, like laid against me and we would just like be in the room and I would play music on my phone and it was like hours like this.*

Meanwhile, the realtor who was selling David and Jack's house had begun staging it for potential buyers.

*David: This woman loved baskets, pillows, and bones. One day we came home and over our bed there was this vitrine of like loose bones with this giant rodent skull. And I was like, how does this sell a house? It was so weird. And I was joking about it, but there was also, I think this part of me that felt like constantly like I don't want to look at all these bones, all these animal bones.*

After a few weeks of radiation treatments, Charlie was doing a little bit better, and the doctors told David he could come home. But he'd only been there for a couple days, when the realtors called one morning and told David and Jack they needed to clear out of the house for the entire day.

*David: there was going to be a Taco truck coming to the house this day. So there had to be no car in the driveway. I mean this real estate company, they really did it up.*

Jack left to go to work - but David wanted a little more time at home with Charlie. He went into the kitchen and tried to give Charlie a treat - they had this game they used to play where David would pretend to drop a spoonful of peanut butter on the floor.

*David: And I dropped the spoon on the ground and Charlie got right to the spoon and he just looked at it and he couldn't locate it. I mean, he was looking at it, but he couldn't get his tongue on it. And he was hitting this kind of frenzy of trying to find it*

By now the taco truck had pulled up outside, and the real estate agent was banging on the door, so David grabbed Charlie in his arms and hustled outside to the car to take Charlie to the park. They didn't make it very far before Charlie had a seizure. It didn't last long, so David kept driving. But then Charlie had a second seizure. And then a third. So instead of the park, David went to pick up Jack, and they rushed Charlie to the animal hospital.

*David: and we hand them Charlie in a blanket as he seizes over the counter and they say, we're going to give him manitol. And I know what manitol is at this point 'cause it's the miracle drug that keeps seizures from happening. And we go home. And I was stressed and I was worried. But I would be lying if I said, oh, I had some huge feeling that it was, it felt like I've done this before. I've handed my seizing dog, wrapped in a blanket over to a stranger like numerous times. And the next, uh, morning we called and was like, how is he? And they said, well, we can't stop the seizure. And I said, no, no, no, I misunderstood. I said, no, no, no, this is Charlie. We brought Charlie in yesterday, like at noon. And they were like, yeah, we can't stop that seizure.*

*[music in]*

*David: I said, we'll call you right back. And I looked at Jack and we looked at each other. And we just knew and we both knew it was, this was it.*

When they got to the animal hospital, Charlie was so heavily drugged he was barely alive. All the hospital staff who'd gotten to know him over the last few months lined up to say goodbye.

*David: And finally, I remember well finally this, the woman that danced to Etta James with him came in and she's like, do you want to unhook him from the drugs and take him outside and dance with him? And I was like, yeah, let's do that. // ... and I don't think I had that moment for more than like, like 10 seconds before the foam started coming out of his mouth and the lip twitching.*

A doctor approached them with three syringes.

*David: And then he gave him the shots and then, uh, he said he's gone. And he looked at me and he just patted me with one hand on the syringe and said this is such a logical choice.*

*[music fades]*

Everyone cleared out of the room, and David and Jack found themselves alone with Charlie's body.

*David: and it was, it was the last thing I did. I, um, I just sat on the couch and I arranged to Charlie's body like in writer position. I just put him on his side and I remember saying out loud to Jack, I said, oh, this is the last time I'm going to feel this. And he said, no, it won't be.*

And it wasn't. Our story continues, after the break.

***[AD BREAK 3]***

In the days and weeks after Charlie's death, David and Jack still had to finish packing up the Eden house and move.

*David: We were telling ourselves it was going to be freeing and we were going to like couch surf and we had friends that had beautiful apartments that needed their cats watched and their plants watered, and we were going to stay at four different places.*

One day around this time, they got a call from Jack's sister Claire - the one who'd moved from Pennsylvania with her son Leo. She wanted to know if they wanted to meet her and Leo for tacos.

*David: and we met them for tacos and Claire and Jack were talking on the other side of the table and Leo was talking to me and we were eating tacos and he, at one point he looked at me and he reached out and he put his very tiny hand on mine and he just said, are you sad? And like, I felt this thing well up in me and I just blurted out, I was like, do you want ice cream? So 30 minutes later we're down the street and we get him his favorite ice cream. Uh, it's cookie monster is the name of flavor and it's this bright, it looks just like cookie monster, this bright toxic blue stuff. And uh, we are um, walking down the street. Claire and Jack are ahead of us and they were in a crosswalk and Leo and I need to go on the crosswalk. I look down at him and he's looking at me like, what am I supposed to do? His face is smeared in blue. The c-- the ice cream is split into two halves. So there's some in the cup, there's some in the cone. It's going down to his elbow and the light starts flashing. And I'm like, can I grab your collar? And he says, okay. So I grabbed his collar and we're crossing the street and we're about halfway across and he looks up at me and he says, it's like I'm on a leash. And I thought, and I said, yeah, yeah, it is. And then right as we're almost to the curb. He says, if you want, I can be Charlie now. And we get up onto the curb and I fall to my knees in front of a forever 21 and I hug him so hard. And as I'm hugging him, I look and I see Jack and Leo's mom, Claire, and they're looking back at us and Claire is sort of saying to Jack like, oh should we, and I see Jack kind of grab her arm in that way. I know what Jack, Jack's being like, let him have this.*

Later that night, back at the Eden house, David was having a rough time. He was sad to have to leave this beautiful place where it had seemed like he and Jack and Charlie were going to make their home - but the house also felt haunted by the terrible memories of the end of Charlie's life. Jack was out at his job waiting tables, so David went into the back yard to enjoy the fig tree one last time - he sat on the bench underneath it and smoked some weed.

*David: There aren't words to describe how opposite of weak this weed was. Within five minutes I fell in on myself. I, it, it felt like the walls were closing in and I was outdoors. Do you know what I mean? Like I didn't know how to correct for that and I ran into the house and I, I just fell into this like, panic.*

In his frenzy, David picked up Charlie's collar, which they'd saved as a memento.

*David: And it's that thing about wanting to like dig deeper into the pain or like...that I have in me and I just put his collar on my wrist and I shook it like I, you know, recreated the sound it had made on his neck for all those years. And then I, I heard it and it was the sound and I can't explain what happened to me, but I just felt like, like I couldn't, like I couldn't go on. Like I.... And I went in the bathroom and I shut the door and I rushed into the bathroom. And I was in the bathroom and I was sitting on the floor and I was staring like across from me at like, you know, like lavatory stuff, like leftover like painkillers and pills and.... And you know, when I was young as like an angry closeted goth kid, I had thought in a very romantic MTV way about suicide many times. I mean, it was a thing, you know, I had built this, I write about this in bad kid about this fantasy that there would be Sinéad O'Connor playing and it would be in a bathtub and there'd be white candles and my father would rush in and pull me up from the water and be like, you could've been a poet. You know, and I would show all them that they should have appreciated me in that very like charged teen angst way. But I had never felt that desire to not exist in that way because I was just so tired.*

But then, David's phone lit up suddenly - a friend was calling. David didn't pick up - but something about the illumination of the phone screen made him look towards the bathroom door, and there was this sliver of light peeking through underneath it.

*David: And you know, it, it was this weird experience because I, I, I, it was a shitty world on the other side of the door, right? Like it was like, it was not pleasant. It was a lot of reminders of stuff that like hurt, but it was like, it was there. Like, I had, I forgot it was there.*

Once he was able to get the door open, David started thinking about Jack.

*David: he had been going to that restaurant night after night reading specials to people, pouring them cocktails like, and that was its own kind of not being able to deal with things. Right? So I just wanted to be like happy homemaker and I just started like zhushing up the place. I remember I was like, I'm gonna fluff up the couch. And I was like set dressing it as like the place that someone with the will to live has been all night, you know? // And when Jack came home I was just there and it was like, it was like, hey, how are you? I was just like drinking tea with like a half packed box, like to me next to me on some fluffed pillows, like watching an old reality show and...you know...his answer to me was fine, how are you? And, when we went to bed that night, I just, I just remember thinking like, God, I got to get out of this.*

David and Jack moved out of the house a few days later. That's when they moved to that little studio apartment across from the Scientology building - and when David took that misguided trip to the group therapy session in Venice. And a few nights later, the next friend's house that they'd arranged to stay in became available. And this house was up on top of a hill - it had a staircase leading up to a big front yard, and a literal white picket fence.

*David: It was like Eden 2. Old wooden walls, with like a cabin inside. It was weird and magical and not updated and had all these old lady country features and I loved it. And the way that the house is positioned, you know your front yard is almost like a ramp, like a, like a pier looking out over the city and the sun sets in that direction.*

One night, not long after they moved in, David and Jack were watching a documentary on Netflix - and it featured a dog named Charlie.

*David: And the couch started like vibrating and I looked over and Jack is a very, like I said, a large person. So when he heaves uncontrollable sobbing, the shit you're on shakes. And he was crying so hard and I reached over and I was like, I said, it's okay. It's okay. And then he said this thing that was like giving voice to this thing that I'd been thinking about. He was like, and I'll always love the way he said it, it makes me love him that he said this this way. He said I want to help another dog.*

They were wary of getting too emotionally attached to a new dog too quickly, so David suggested they could start by fostering one. They reached out to this organization called Muttscoots, which specialized in dogs with traumatic backgrounds. And one night, a woman from Muttscoots called and said they had a dog that needed to be nursed back to health so that it could be adopted out.

*David: It was a three month old, four month old puppy. It was found in Tijuana being kicked by a group of children as it screamed to try and break into a church that was boarded up and it had no hair on half of its body due to a severe mange condition.*

The woman said she was actually in their neighborhood, and she could bring the dog over that night.

*David: So I opened the door and I'm looking at the big green yard and white picket fence and she comes through the white picket fence and she's holding this towel and from this towel I just see this like entirely black face with just pounds of drool pouring from its mouth...*

After a few weeks, the dog's condition started to improve. His hair grew back, he stopped drooling - and every once in a while, David and Jack would sometimes realize they should probably call Muttscoots to check in. But then they kept not making call.

*David: I mean we were like two or three months in and being like, I mean the dog is better. We've quote unquote fostered what happens now? You know? And then it just became a joke. Like there was never a moment where we were like, we're keeping him. We were, he was just our dog. Frankie, which is what we named him.*

As time went on, David started to notice something about Frankie.

*David: I would take him outside with me some nights and he was small for a while and he would be in my lap and we would watch the sun go down. But then as he got older he started like, even if I wasn't, he would, he would go a little around 6:30-7 every night and he would run to the front yard and he would sit on the sidewalk and he would like, watch the sunset. And I think, you know, I don't know if animals have an idea of where they're from. I don't know what their memory is like I don't know how long they retain, you know, some semblance of I was in a horrible place and now I'm not, but there's this sense that when he goes out into that yard and he watches the sunset, that he's literally like taking some time to just like practice a little bit of gratitude. Of course, that whole time living in that house, I was pretty much taking that time to have gratitude too, right.*

These days, David, Jack, and Frankie live in a small one-bedroom in Little Armenia. David's working on his next book, Jack gives lessons on a keyboard in the living room, and for much of the time that David and I spent on his couch recording all this, Frankie hung out with us, laying in writing position for hours on end. As David told his story, I got such a clear sense of how much it's been shaped by Brandy and her instinct for self-preservation; Charlie, who helped David find his own voice. And when it comes to Frankie, and gratitude, there's one memory in

particular that David finds himself returning to. It's actually from the night Charlie died.

*David: You know we got home that night and I walked into this house that was like someone's fucking like anthropology nightmare of like woven blankets and bones. And the lights were off and I was just so numb and I remember Jack saying, someone's in the house. I said, what? And he said, I'm sorry someone's been in the house. And I exploded with rage because I realized that I was probably about to see evidence of like the real estate people not having cleaned the house and it was going to be someone's fucking taco truck refuse or whatever. I don't know. There was pamphlets and right as I was about to go into a rage, Jack started, shit. Jack started like crying in the kitchen and the freezer door was swinging open behind him. And I was like, I remember it was such a funny like stage picture. I was like, why are you weeping in the freezer? Someone's been in our house and he opened the refrigerator door and he was like, look. And our whole kitchen was stocked with food and on the counter right by it was this huge bouquet of white flowers and Claire and Leo had come over. And it's such a simple thing like food, you know what I mean? But God, it was like, it was fleeting cause I was gonna I was angry and I was going to be angry and sad for many weeks. But in that moment I was like, Oh God, this is what it means to have family here.*

*[music in]*

*David: And it also reminded me like, oh no there's a reason I loved Charlie that's specific to Charlie. There's a reason I love Frankie that's specific to Frankie. Like, you know, your people are your people and maybe like your dogs are your dogs. Like you just got to find them.*

*Family Ghosts* is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman, with Vera Carothers, Soraya Shockley, Sally Helm, Odelia Rubin, Jenna Hannum, and Janielle Kastner. Our story editor is Micaela Blei. Our production assistant is Julia Press. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett. Our theme music is by Luis Guera, and this episode featured original piano music by David's husband, Jack Perry. Executive producers for Season Three are myself, along with Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian at Spoke Media. Special thanks as always to the Kindred Spirits - our supporters on Patreon who help make our work possible. In addition to ad-free episodes and exclusive bonus content, Kindred Spirits have already heard this story

- they get to listen to everything we make before anyone else. And this week, they're getting a special bonus story from David featuring a story about yet another dog that we had to cut for time. If you have the means, please consider becoming a member of the Kindred Spirits for just five dollars a month at patreon dot com slash family ghosts. We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media - find more great podcasts at spoke media dot eye oh. Season Three continues next week - we'll talk to you then, and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts*, where every house is haunted.

Ghost Family, if you or someone you care about is considering harming themselves, we want you to know that help is available. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK. That's 1-800-273-8255 or visit their website: [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

Next time on *Family Ghosts*...

*Kierran:* The stories, they'd kind of just come out of nowhere. From a really early age they were just like, "Oh, your grandfather did this, your grandfather did that. This crazy thing happened. He robbed a bank."

Kierran's grandfather Einar loved to regale his family with stories about his criminal adventures. And even though they've never known whether there was any truth to the stories, to this day, his family loves to tell and retell Einar's greatest hits.

Robyn: And he had nothing to do with Clams-R-U's, right?

Kierran: What? What?

Robyn: Because in the jewelry heist, that's what he uses. Yeah, they hid them in the clams. I was like, yeah.

Are we sure he didn't try to Rob a bank with Superman costume or are we [inaudible] are we, would we know?

They're great stories - as Kierran's gotten older, she's started to realize that as much fun as her grandfather seemed to be, he also left a lot of wreckage in his

wake. And since no one else in the family has ever tried, Kierran wants to finally separate the facts from the mythology Einar created for himself.

*Kierran:* I think it's important to have like a basic, I don't know. I'm going to cry. I always cry at these things. But I think that it's important to like actually make an effort to remember things.

But when you're dealing with a Fabulist like Einar, where do you start? Well, Kierran thought, how about that unproduced screenplay he wrote - the one about a bank heist he supposedly pulled off.

*Kierran:* Fade in. Establishing shots. Fifth avenue, morning. Peter finishes the last bite of a toasted english muffin, and gulps the remains of a bloody mary, raising the empty glass to toast his wife.

*Voice:* Getting ready for work. Finishing his bloody mary.

That's coming up next week, when Season Three of *Family Ghosts* continues.