

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

*[music: FG Theme]*

For the last few months, one of our producers, Soraya Shockley, has been talking to a woman from California named Mariah Landers. For a while now, Mariah has been on a pretty remarkable journey - one of those where the destination ends up being completely different than where you think you're headed when you first set out.

*MARIAH: Hello! I'm in Jamaica. It's totally surreal that I'm actually here. It's beautiful and wonderful.*

SORAYA: That's Mariah. She's reading from a journal entry she wrote in the summer of 2000.

*MARIAH: Last night flying into Kingston the city looked magical. On the ground you can see the disparities as we drove past properties. I'm so glad that I'm here and okay - healthy and clean and safe.*

Mariah was drawn to Jamaica by a question that had followed her through her entire life. A question that had only ever been answered by resolute silence. A question about her roots.

When I first met Mariah, we were sitting in a makeshift basement studio in Oakland, California - just her, me, and the occasional sounds of Bay Area Rapid Transit.

*[BART Ambi]*

*MARIAH: sounds like a ghost.*

*SORAYA: Family ghosts!*

With the subway as our companion, we dove right in.

*SORAYA: What was your, what was your childhood like?*

*MARIAH: Uh, childhood. I, so I grew up with a mom, a white mom, and um, my grandmother, her mom and my sister who was also mixed race.*

Mariah's mother was a single mom. As a child, growing up in Merced, California, in the 1980's, Mariah was told her father lived in Jamaica. And that's it. She never met him - never even saw a picture of him.

Mariah's life back then wasn't complicated. And the things that made her happy weren't complicated either.

*MARIAH: We were in a pocket, like a suburb outside of town that was, uh, not known to me that, that we were low income until much later in my life. But it was delightful because it was out in the country. So I had fields that were around our little neighborhood and I remember like walking through the field to get to the candy store with my friends or, um, going on dune buggies with my neighbor...we had a little posse and we would walk around the neighborhood a lot...I would say the first five years of my life were pretty, um, pretty sweet.*

Then one day, 5 year old Mariah was looking through the trash can behind her house and found something she couldn't understand...

*MARIAH: I had found this letter from my dad, a happy birthday card.*

Suddenly, after years of knowing nothing about her father, she found herself holding proof of his existence in her hands. She was too young to fully comprehend the meaning of the moment - but even then, she realized she wanted answers. Mariah called out for her mom, who came outside to find her holding the card.

*MARIAH: it's such a weird memory, but we were in the very back of the yard where the trash cans were. Just like the least, you know, aesthetic place in the whole house. I'm asking her if she loved my dad. Um, and I remember, oh, taking the garbage from my hands, putting it in the trash and then saying something like, I, I loved your dad but I*

*didn't like your dad. Something like that. I remembered that essence being loud and clear. And then it was totally dropped.*

When Mariah says the subject was dropped, she means it. She never broached the topic of her father with her mom again. Ever. And over the years, that brief exchange by the garbage cans continued to haunt her.

*MARIAH: ...finding this birthday card that was from my dad and reading it and being totally shocked and knowing that I wasn't supposed to. I wasn't supposed to see it.*

*SORAYA: Why does that make you upset?*

*MARIAH: Well, I guess I wonder like why didn't she wanted to share that with me? Why wouldn't you tell a four year old that her dad is thinking of her? What harm would that have done?*

SAM: From Spoke Media, and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this week, producer Soraya Shockley brings us the story of Mariah's attempt to unravel the mystery of her father's absence. This is episode twenty-two, *The Trove*. Our story continues after the break.

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

SORAYA: After that afternoon by the garbage cans, Mariah was convinced her mom wanted her to forget her father, and the island he called home.

*MARIAH: I think what I got was that it wasn't very pleasant, that it wasn't pleasant. He wasn't pleasant. And I think the effort was to scare me to not fantasize about who he was and to not fantasize about Jamaica and wanting to go there.*

But if anything, the silence only fueled Mariah's imagination:

*MARIAH: It was like maybe fantasy island, I would imagine...claymation, kind of? you know, it was animated, it was bright, it was always bright. Like roads going up and around these mountains. And I always wanted brothers. So I would imagine all of these brothers. And I would just imagine my dad and like hanging out-*

The fantasy was nice; it made her feel loved and safe and warm. But as she grew up, she craved a more substantial connection to Jamaica, one that she didn't have to daydream about but could touch and hold and really know. There was just one problem: the only direct access she had to Jamaica was through letters she discovered one day while snooping around in her mom's files. The letters were from her father - Mariah remembers rifling through them, hoping to discover the secrets about who he was that her mother had kept from her for so long. But as she read the letters, Mariah became overwhelmed with guilt. She folded them up and put them back where she'd found them, and never told her mom about her discovery. After she put the letters away, the only link Mariah was left with was the Jamaica entry in the pages of her encyclopedia.

But the older Mariah got and the longer she went without a concrete connection to Jamaica and her father, the hungrier and more urgent her need for answers became.

*MARIAH: I went to UC Santa Cruz and studied cultural anthropology. Part of the study of cultural anthropology was to do a lot of identity work and that led to deep research, um, into understanding who I was as a mixed race person.*

*[MUSIC CUE]*

*MARIAH: It was, uh, you know, this incident that I had in one of my classes where I was doing a report on Jamaica, um, that just put a fire under my ass to really get to know who I am. Um, and it was this presentation. I was standing in front of the class and I had mispronounced, um, Haile Selassie and this kid in the very back of the classroom just kind of out loud, blurted, you know, you mispronounced that, it's such and such. And I just was totally, one, embarrassed, but so pissed. Like I remember having like these, this just a searing, um, emotion to just shoot this guy with like with bone arrows. Like I just saw myself just like, like how dare you! Cause it just felt so painful and so disruptive, um, to my process. And he didn't know that he was disrupting me, he thought he was being helpful. But what irked me so much was the fact that he was a white male and he had dreadlocks and I could not stand that he was cloaked and drenched in a cultural experience that was, um, that was mine to know and love and hold. And here he was totally saturated in it and I had no access to it at all. And so in that moment it was just*

*like a flash of like, never will this ever happen again. I will know who I am. I will know Jamaica. And then that set off this whole chain of events.*

*MARIAH: So then I was at work, I was working at the Santa Cruz bagelry and uh, I was working the cash register and I see this woman in the middle of this long line. So, um, there's always this line out the door on Sundays and this woman is standing in the middle between me and the door, and I see her step out of line and bend over and pick something up. And by the time she gets to me, she puts this thing on the counter and she says, this is for you. And I, you know, I'm like, okay. So I pick this thing up and it's a coin.*

*[music in]*

*MARIAH: And this coin says Jamaica. And I flip it over and it says 1977, which is the year that I was born. So I'm perplexed. I'm very perplexed. And I said, what do you mean this is from me? And she says, it's for you. I found it. Um, and I, you know, I'm checking my, my mind and I'm like, yeah, I saw this woman bend over and pick this thing up. It's been a week or so, or two weeks since I gave that presentation. So in that heartbeat, I know this is a sign from the universe that says you're going to Jamaica. So I had received this firm confirmation that I needed to get to Jamaica and I was going. How often do you get a coin the year that you're born, the place that you're thinking of going in?*

I'd probably say, "rarely." Here was a complete stranger in a bagel shop of all places handing Mariah a sign so perfectly tailored to her that it's almost creepy. Was Jamaica summoning Mariah? Calling to her? If so, how could she ignore the call?

One mystically serendipitous event led to another. See, Mariah has type one diabetes and was able to contact a summer camp for diabetic children in Jamaica.

*MARIAH: um, I called them up and said, hey, I'm interested in coming to work for you. And they said, great, come on over. These are the dates. And then that set off the, Oh how am I going to get a ticket? Like I'm this poor broke college student. I'm about to graduate. Um, so I applied for a computer loan...and got this computer loan for like \$3,000. And I did not buy the computer. I bought a ticket to Jamaica.*

The plan was set in motion. Light loan fraud committed, tickets booked, Mariah was ready to set out for Jamaica...almost. Like most things between Mariah and her

mom, they didn't talk about her trip. She told her mom she was going, but didn't tell her why. Her mom never asked and Mariah never offered. Then, just before Mariah was set to leave, her mother gave her an envelope. It was a letter her father had sent - one of the ones from that secret file Mariah had found many years earlier, the file she never told her mom she knew about. The envelope had Mariah's father's name printed on it - Alexander Rankine.

*MARIAH: She um, hands me this letter and she says, you might want this.*

*SORAYA: Did you say anything to each other?*

*MARIAH: No.*

*SORAYA: Not even when she gave you the letter?*

*MARIAH: I think I said thanks.*

As Mariah set off for Jamaica, the silence between them remained steadfast.

*SORAYA: What happens after that?*

*MARIAH: Then I'm on a plane to Jamaica.*

Whatever feelings Mariah had when her mom handed her that letter with her father's name on it, they faded once she got on that plane.

*MARIAH: I remember flying to Montego Bay and seeing the island for the first time. And like, the first question in my mind is, he's down there like, you know, where on this island is he driving right now? Um, he's here, like I'm, I'm here. You know.*

*SORAYA: What do you see...*

*MARIAH: like you see there's trees, you see expansive, you just see lushness and you just see trees from the plane. it's really beautiful.*

*MARIAH: I get off the plane. And so, um, the director of the Camp, Yvonne was the woman that picked me up at the airport.*

Remember, Mariah had technically come to Jamaica to work at a summer camp for diabetic children.

*MARIAH: It's hot and sweaty and I'm just totally loving all of it. and beginning to build the images of who I am, my culture, what rightfully I belong to.*

*SORAYA: What are you seeing?*

*MARIAH: Oh my God. First it's the faces of the people. So like the broadness in their face, the broadness and their shoulders, the shape of their eyes. I'm seeing all of that first and seeing how much I look like most of the people like around me. Um, and just a feeling that I fit in instantly.*

During the day, Mariah was occupied with her job as a camp counselor chasing kids around as they swam and hiked. But she never forgot the true purpose behind her trip. The second night she was there, she got the kids to bed and hurried down to the kitchen, where there was a landline. The chefs and support staff were busy cleaning up from dinner and preparing for breakfast the next morning. Mariah picked up the phone book.

*MARIAH: And I am determined that I'm going to at least try to look up Alexander Rankin in the phone book and that I would start calling and sure enough, that's what I did. I went turned to the Rankins and as soon as I saw that list of Rankins, I took a deep breath and realize like, oh my God, the name Rankin is like the name Smith in America.*

Mariah was dismayed to discover page after page of listings for the name Alexander Rankine.

*MARIAH: And still there was this thing in me that said, at least try, you got to try.*

So Mariah picked up the phone and started dialing.

*MARIAH: I'm laughing now because it was so ridiculous. I'm just cold calling people and people either one can't understand me, my accent or I can't understand theirs. Um, so by like the third or fourth one, I just realize that this is just going to be an impossible task. And I closed the phone book and some of the, the women that are, they're cooking,*

*they're kind of like laughing, you know, I remember one of the guys laughing and two of these women just kinda like smirking, but like with love and like, that's adorable. Um, and then I go to bed.*

This was probably the end of the road. It was how Mariah expected the search for her father to end. She knew that without a phone number, her best bet was spending long nights calling strangers or maybe posting an ad in the local paper. Other than that, next steps seemed few and far between.

*[music in]*

Then, two women who worked at the camp approached Mariah.

*MARIAH: So two days into this camp experience, um, two women came to me Auntie Vi and Auntie Mave and they said that Auntie Yvonne, everyone's Auntie, Auntie Yvonne had told them about my story with my dad. and that Auntie Mave was actually from Ginger Hill, which is the specific area where my dad is from and that she was gonna. Um, they were both going to go out and take a look around for me, um, the following day.*

Was it luck? A coincidence? A sign, like the coin in the bagel shop? Mariah didn't really care. These two women that she barely knew were volunteering to find her father; she accepted the help.

*MARIAH: They headed out really early in the morning and uh, they came back really late at night. And so the kids, I'd already tucked the kids into bed and counselors were out, you know, doing our fun counselor stuff. And they called me over, um, and sit me down and they said, we have good news and we have bad news. What would you like to hear first? And it was like, out of nowhere, I just knew, I said, my dad's dead isn't he, and I was a conver, it was a question or it was a statement that I had never said to myself in such a way, but it was like profound in that moment of like, I already knew this. And they said, yes. And so I started crying and just started sobbing and they reached over and grabbed my hands and they said, well, the good news is, is that you have a grandfather and you have seven aunts and uncles and you have lots and lots of cousins and you have 10 brothers and sisters. And I just started laughing and crying at the same time. And it was this emotion that I had never felt before. Like, I didn't know you could actually cry from deep sorrow and laugh from deep joy in the same instant.*



In one moment, Mariah had both gained and lost everything she'd spent 20 years dreaming about. The father she desperately wanted to know was suddenly gone but in his place was a wonderfully overwhelming extended family.

*MARIAH: So they gave me a day process and then they came down in, about 30 people in three cars.*

*SORAYA: 30 people in three cars?!*

*MARIAH: Something like that. Yeah. That's how my brain remembers it. I don't even recall*

*SORAYA: Clown cars. Just more people*

*MARIAH: for sure. I mean total Jamaican style.*

*SORAYA: Yeah...*

*MARIAH: So they came down bucketfuls of people in three cars and uh, the camp put them into one of the dorms, one of the rooms, it's like a hotel room and they escorted me, I think it was Auntie Vi and Auntie Mave. And they escorted me to the door and opening the door, and the room is just literally filled like from edge to edge of people sitting around in a circle waiting to meet me. I kinda take a deep breath, and I see myself. That's the first thing that I remember is seeing myself in all of the faces that are in this room. And I kind of collapsed against the door. Um, and my grandfather called me over and he sits me on his lap and he just starts to cradle me like I was a baby. And so I'm sobbing. Um, and they give me a moment and then I do a round of like Hellos and I'm hugging, um, people and just, uh, yeah, just meeting them and hearing who these people are for the first time.*

*[music in]*

*MARIAH: I was flooded with stories of who my dad was. I mean, I think as people, as my family got to know me and see me and observe me, the more the stories came out. So the more that they recognized him in me, um, my aunt, she is just like, you're, you're his ghost. Like you have, you have the same laugh, you have the same walk. And she just couldn't take her eyes off me. And hearing for the first time about, you know, his personality and so strikingly different than the little bit that I was told. And their take on him was that he was just really jovial and he was really giving and he was really charismatic and everybody loved him. And he was sort of like the community caretaker. Like he always made sure everybody was okay and gave people rides and was just like a happy, fun guy.*

Finally, they took Mariah back to her father's house. This was the last place her dad was alive in, the last place that held tangible proof of who he was day in and day out.

*MARIAH: And walking into that house, um, was quite a shock because this was three years after my dad had died and my baby pictures were still sitting on the, the, the main centerpiece of this, console? Like TV console? So the TV, um, was in the middle of the bookshelf thing and then my baby pictures, there was like three or four of them that were on top. And I was like, is this a setup? Like did she do this for my benefit? But it was dusty. So I think I was, that's the way it is.*

She wasn't forgotten. If anything, she was revered. Her father had taken care to maintain her memory as if it was sacred. All those thoughts of being unloved and uncared for were washed away.

*MARIAH: I think I just felt new. I felt like a new person had been born inside me. um yeah I think I was profoundly different. I had new skin, I had new shade to my spirit. Um, to see all of my curves and all of my aunties and just to feel like this is where I get this trait. Like I make sense now, my body makes sense. Um, and to be able to look at it with a new sense of love and affection and adoration rather than spite. It's hard to say that I had self hatred, but I think that that must have been a part of what I was holding. Just feeling so, just feeling beautiful and being, you know? Yeah. Just totally adored. So that changes everything.*

Mariah went on to build close relationships with many of her siblings, and she continues to visit Jamaica regularly to this day. Mariah thought she'd finished the journey she set out on. It was a complete, almost magical story about reconnecting with long lost family, and finding the missing pieces of one's life. And yet, more than twenty years after her first trip to Jamaica, something still haunts Mariah. She's never confronted her mom about *why* her father had been a secret in the first place.

A few years after the trip, Mariah actually went back to her Mom's home and took the hidden file of letters. She keeps them in her house for safekeeping- but she

hadn't really looked at the letters much since that day she first discovered them. Recently, she pulled them out and started reading.

*MARIAH: It's, you know, Pandora's gate.*

SAM: Family Ghosts will continue in a moment.

**[AD BREAK 2]**

SORAYA: Remember that story about the birthday card that Mariah dug up from the trash when she was five years old - only to have her mother throw it out again? As she got older, Mariah had thought back on that moment often. Sometimes she wasn't even sure it was a real memory.

And so, one day in high school, when her mom wasn't home, Mariah had started snooping in her files - wondering if there were other birthday cards her mother had never shown her. And what she discovered was overwhelming.

*MARIAH: Holy Shit. There were more, there were definitely more.*

Turns out there was a trove of letters her father had sent over the years.

*MARIAH: it's a mix of birthday cards to me and letters to my mom. I remember taking one of the letters that totally broke me. it's a beautiful card and it's a foot that is standing on a box and inside the box is a heart. And on the inside is this note to me that says how much he loves me. And so I stole that and I framed it as well. I think what you're getting now is what, what's happening when I was reading the letters.*

*SORAYA: Did you read all of them?*

*MARIAH: Yeah, I read all of the letters. You know, I think part of it is, is great shock when you get to read the words of someone that you've, um, imagined your whole life. And to see their handwriting, you get instant information. Like his handwriting was like a child's handwriting really. It was, it was printed. Um, it kind of looked like a third graders writing maybe, um, his vocabulary wasn't expansive. Um, but I could, I could feel like the longing came through in those letters and uh, the sadness came through in*

*those letters and there was definitely like a, a strong, um, need for him to know that I was loved. And so I think that the hardest part has been having that denied, to me. Seeing that he wanted to be in connection with me.*

Discovering the letters was a crossroads for Mariah. She wondered how her mother could keep these parts of herself hidden from her? Why had her mom stayed silent all these years? Mariah wanted answers. But then...

*MARIAH: I put the letters back to protect my mom.*

Mariah never told her mother about what she saw that day. When it comes to her father, the letters are just one of the many things Mariah and her mother have never discussed.

When Mariah and I started talking, she hadn't looked at the letters in a long time. And in hopes that I could help her finally get answers- I asked if she wanted to open them up again.

*[music]*

*MARIAH: Okay. So I found a bunch of letters that looks like the stack of letters that I took from my mom's house. On top, it says letters from Alexander.*

*MARIAH: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...*

*MARIAH: I'm reading a letter, um, dated March 17th, 1979. And he's asking if, if my mom received any checks, um, for his job. He always signs take care of the baby and yourself. Love Alex.*

*MARIAH: ...7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12...*

*MARIAH: Just read a letter and the first question is Regina, how are you and the baby? Um, I don't think I've read this letter ever, and it's just really sweet. I like hearing him talk about Jamaica.*

*MARIAH: ...13, 14, 15, 16...*

*MARIAH: ...he's asking for my birth certificate so that he has proof, um, in order to send my mom money. Um, I don't think that ever happened.*

*MARIAH: ...17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24...*

*MARIAH: ...feels invasive, I guess. I remember going through these at the time and feeling like it was really important. And now I feel like I'm spying. I don't know if she knows that I have these letters, and now I just feel a little guilty about that...and it also is just seeing his handwriting again. Um it feels like raising him from the dead, you know?*

*SORAYA: you said, um, you said you felt like you were raising the dead--*

*MARIAH: Mm.*

*SORAYA: When you were reading, when you were going through the letters.*

*MARIAH: Mm.*

*SORAYA: What did you mean by that?*

*MARIAH: Um...I'm just gonna have to like ugly cry through this. [Laughs]*

*SORAYA: That's alright.*

*MARIAH: Uh, I think what I meant, is that it, it's so, um, his words, seeing his handwriting. It's just so alive that it feels like he's really there. Like I get to be in the room with him... You know, I feel like I've had this ongoing relationship with him in my mind my entire life. And revisiting these letters, it's like I'm re-starting a relationship.*

Rereading the letters opened up a well of emotion that Mariah had carefully tucked away for years. She had been able to avoid most of these feelings by just staying present. After the trip to Jamaica, she focused on the family members she met there - her brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. The letters - and what they meant to her in terms of her relationship to her father, and her mother - stayed locked away.

*MARIAH: I feel like I didn't really ever have the right to know him or to understand his voice. That because I am American born and I've had a very privileged life in comparison to my, my brothers and sisters, that his spirit was more for them and that I didn't really deserve it.*

But reading through them this time, Mariah felt something new.

*MARIAH: I think the main hang up is... not being able to talk about this with my mom.*

*[music fades]*

*MARIAH: Um, I think what's wonderful is that I feel immediately taken back to a place where I'm observing 1979 in, through the eyes of my mom. she was, she was quite young. She was I think maybe 23 or 24.*

*SORAYA: And what are you imagining when you're putting yourself in your mom's shoes?*

*MARIAH: I'm imagining how difficult it must have been for my mom to have to deal with him. Like deal with the loss of -- like loss of love, but loss of you know a future where she was going to have support to raise me. And like I kind of can sense like this irritation, like, like what, why should I help you? You know? I can only imagine what that must have been like, to be really young and trying to figure out your future and having this mixed race kid in, you know, the late '70s and trying to figure out what comes next.*

Building empathy for her mom was one of Mariah's main concerns throughout this process.

*MARIAH: I think the main hangup is not being able to talk about this with my mom.*

She really wanted to make sure that her desire to know her father and dig into her past wasn't for the wrong reasons and was fair to her mom.

*MARIAH: I've been, wondering like, why, why do I need this? Like, why do I need so much, um, investigation into this, the male part of, of me? Right? Into my father part. Um, because what I know to be true is that I was raised by incredible women, and I don't wanna deny like, how, um, how much that has, you know, how much beauty has been there.*

After months of talking, and working through the complex feelings that surrounded everything to do with her mom, Mariah told me she felt ready to put all her questions to the woman herself.

And finally, she did...

*MOTHER: Hello?*

*MARIAH: Hi*

*MOTHER: Hi.*

*MARIAH: Are you ready?*

*MOTHER: Yeah.*

*MARIAH: Ok!*

But then, there was another curveball.

*MARIAH: Um, well the first question is, I have to ask, are you okay if I record?*

*MOTHER: Am I what?*

*MARIAH: Are you okay if I record?*

*MOTHER: Uhh, I'd prefer not.*

*[music in]*

Fortunately, Mariah called me as soon as she got off the phone with her mom.

*SORAYA: How are you doing?*

*MARIAH: Uh, great. Doing Great. That was so, so amazing.*

SAM: Our story continues, after the break.

***[AD BREAK 3]***

Mariah's conversation with her mom was nothing short of a revelation.

*MARIAH: Like I've just, I've never had a conversation like that with my mom ever, and she was the most open I've ever seen her, you know, spoken. She's just, yeah, she's never,*

*she's never given me this much information in my entire life, so, um, I'm kind of like giddy. It's this kind of amazing to have all of this insight.*

*SORAYA: Okay. So delight. Honestly, I wasn't, I wasn't sure what to expect out of this conversation. Um, delight was not on my list of things that were going to happen. Can you tell me what made it delightful for you?*

*MARIAH: I told her the whole story, like I was able to be straight up so honest, which is really hard to just be that fully honest with her because I'm constantly kind of in protection mode and like how is she going to take things. And um,*

*SORAYA: Right.*

*MARIAH: I told her about the moment of being four years old. I told her about finding the card. She said she had no, no idea that I had found that card. Um, she had no idea that I had taken this pile of letters. She, she really was shocked. She was straight up so shocked. And the part about the letters, Soraya, she had, she had no, she had straight up put that out of her mind. I said, there's like 20 letters here mom, and she's like what? She really was shocked. She said in fact, are you kidding me? Was her first response. Um, and so she said, yeah, well the next time I'm in there you can show them to me. And I that, that's the part that just like shut me down. I started laughing cause I was like, this is such a huge part of my whole experience are these letters and here she is not even, not even one flicker of a memory or care about them.*

That's right. Mariah's mom didn't know anything about the letters. She had forgotten. Or maybe more accurately, she had compartmentalized everything about Mariah's father—folded up all the memories, heartache, and disappointment and locked it away deep in a dark closet in her mind. Closed the door and never looked back.

As wild as it sounds, I can actually relate to Mariah's mom. I have forgotten things that seem impossible to forget. But, they were things I didn't want to remember. Either willfully or not, my mind helped protect me from a past too heavy to constantly hold. The same way Mariah's mom protected herself and—by extension—probably thought she was protecting Mariah as well. But now, 40 years later, her daughter was asking her to open that door one last time, and remember.



*MARIAH: So what she said was like, she was, it was really a volatile relationship in the end. Like in the beginning it was great. He was pleasant, he was wonderful and beautiful. And um, in the end it was really volatile. So, once she explained that, she also explained how, um, you know, she was always afraid that he would come and kidnap me and that he like had tried to kidnap her cat and like he actually took her cat and put the cat in the car and was going to take the cat to the dump. And my mom ended up getting the cat saving the cat from being taken. So she always believed that he was, you know, she saw the capacity in him to come and take me when that happened. And so everything was just really illuminated. And I like in that moment of her saying that like, I just understood, I understood everything. It's like though I, it's like, wow, that makes me understand the whole world now. Like of course you would never want to talk about this man. Of course you would never want to share anything about him. Of course there's never enough, there's never anything nice to say. Um, he, so my mom also suffered like the trauma of being treated so badly ...*

*[music in]*

*MARIAH: I think it changes my relationship with my mom. And instead of being mad, I feel adoration. And I, I told her, I said, I wish you had told me all of this sooner. Like, I've carried this my whole life. And she said, she said she knew. She was like, yeah, I, I'd never had anything nice to say.*

*SORAYA: Do you have space in your heart to hold both truths? Do you think that your dad, um, was not nice and was not good to your mom, but loved you deeply?*

*MARIAH: Um, yeah. I, I mean I think that I'm someone that holds complex, like I've had to hold complexity my entire life and so this another, another level of it is, is not perplexing to me. It, um, if anything, it kind of solidifies my positionality as a person who walks in two worlds constantly.*

Mariah has only just started grappling with everything she has learned throughout this process. But she is ready to forge a renewed relationship with her mom and start the hard work of transforming her imagination of her father into a fuller, imperfect being.

She still holds the letters her father wrote all those years ago close to her— one even hangs on a wall in her home. Those letters went unanswered for decades. But recently, Mariah sat down and finally wrote a letter back.

*MARIAH: Dear Dad, My entire life has been in pursuit of imagining who you are. The memories I created of you were joyous and kind. And I came to know you through Jamaica. The family and community there hold memories of you that are so fond and loving. You were godly to them. My aunts and uncles sigh with heaviness when your name is spoken. These new insights complicate my imagination. I must now consider your demon sides. I must now think even about why you lashed out. Was it the stress of white America? Was it the loss of your own vision? Was it a complicated tie to Jamaica—the pull between your father, your family and the intentions and hopes and dreams you had planted when you came here? I bear the sadness of not knowing and being blind to what really happened. You were mean. You were volatile. You hurt us. That’s the thing you probably didn’t realize at the time but in being cruel to my mom, it set off a course of behaviors in her that lead to emotional suffering in me. She never talked about you. So I wondered and wondered. She never explained why you left. So I wondered and wondered. I’m a 40 year old woman still carrying the cries of a 6month old. I know that stress patterns are imprinted in a baby’s brain at that age. My cries for you must have etched deep crevices of loss in my brain. The pain of my mother must have seeped in and coated those places that were mapping out the structure of my mind. I am afraid I’ve harbored them for so long that not even storms in my life were able to set them free. It is only now in this truth telling opportunity that I realize the serum for healing: the recognition of all the components that comprised my narratives. The relief of understanding what my mom’s story was, understanding her pain, her conviction, and the need to airtight seal the memory of you. I’m grateful of course for all of this. And I eagerly let go of all the pain, curiosity, and belief that I needed you in this physical realm. I understand now, I understand how loved I have always been.*

SAM: *Family Ghosts* is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman, with Vera Carothers, Soraya Shockley, Sally Helm, Odelia Rubin, Jenna Hannum, and Janielle Kastner. This episode was reported by Soraya. 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. Executive producers for Season Three are myself, along with Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian at Spoke Media. Special thanks this week to Mia Birdsong, Carson McCain, and 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 actually already heard this episode - they get to listen to everything we make before anyone else. And this week, they're getting a special bonus interview with Mariah and me, from our very first conversation about collaborating on this story. If you have the means, please consider becoming a member of the Kindred Spirits for just five dollars a month and you can join by visiting [patreon.com/familyghosts](https://patreon.com/familyghosts). We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media - find more great podcasts at [spoke media.io](https://spokemedia.io). Season Three continues next week - we'll talk to you then, and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts*, where every house is haunted.

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*Woman 1: So let me tell you what's happening. I'm laying on my son's bed and he's sleeping in the next room with my husband. And I'm sleeping on my son's bed because I need the space because I am extremely pregnant with our second child.*

Next time, on *Family Ghosts*...

Three storytellers receive visitations from the past.

*Woman 2: So it's Sunday night supper and I'm out at a restaurant...*

*Man: We get in the car, we go to this cemetery. We search around. Within a short amount of time, I find the family plot. And there's the burial stone.*

Namisha, Sandy, and Richard all have unfinished business with their parents. And next week, they resolve to do what they have to -- whether they're ready or not.

*Woman 1: So I'm laying on that bed trying to figure out how did this happen?*

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