

SAM: Before we begin, a quick programming note. *Family Ghosts* will be off next week, but season three, we'll continue with an all new episode on Wednesday, March 4th. Until then, please enjoy this week's story and thank you, as always, for listening.

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

[music]

Friends, by now you've heard us tell a wide range of stories about people who are haunted by the legends of the past. In most of our episodes, the action of the story focuses on those people attempting to lift the weight of that haunting from their shoulders. To exorcise those ghosts, if you will. But something we haven't talked much about is the moment that haunting first reveals itself, that shiver of realization that your entire perception of your family and your place in it has changed forever.

But your humble narrator recently took the stage at a live storytelling show to tell a story about just such a moment.

SAM: Um, so a couple years ago I got invited to go to my girlfriend's family reunion. Um, and this was really exciting for me because I was planning to propose to my girlfriend and I had not met this side of her family before. So this was a big deal. But there was a little problem, which was that her family is comprised of outside people. Um, by which I mean people who like to spend time outside. I am an inside person. Um, as a matter of fact, uh, working in radio and podcasting, I spend most of my time in rooms that are designed to deny the existence of outside. That's how much I like being inside. So I said, what's on the agenda for the family reunion? Um, and she said hiking. And I said, shit. But I went on the reunion and I was like, I'll find a way in, I'll find a way in. And I was very relieved when I got

there to discover that there was a large contingent at this family reunion of old wasps in a basement drinking martinis. And I'm very good at that.

But then my girlfriend walks over with some other folks from the family and she says, "we're going to go for an H I. K. E. Do you want to get in on this?" And I thought to myself, Sam, you have an option here. You can stay here and do the thing you're good at, or you can go on the hike. So I said, "yeah, I'd love to go on the hike. Let's hike it up." So we set off on this hike and, and we walk up to the top of this mountain and it's going pretty good so far. First, I made it to the top of the mountain. So that's a big deal for me. Um, but then things take a little bit of a turn. All these clouds roll in and it starts to rain like really, really, really heavily. The hardest rain I can ever remember being in. Um, for my girlfriend's family, no problem. They're outside people. They were wearing waterproof pants. I was wearing this. Except that I was also wearing a powder blue sport coat cause I was trying to make a good impression. Instead I made the worst possible impression.

So I don't know what to do. And one of her cousins says, "Oh, no problem. I brought an umbrella." So I say, "great, there's only one way for me to look more ridiculous. Thank you so much." So I put up this umbrella. And we start making our way down the mountain.

And at a certain point, I feel this thing that I've never felt before, and this is what it felt like. It feels like the hand of God has reached out of the sky, grabbed the top of the umbrella, lifted me into the air, and then thrown me to the ground. And this is accompanied by a sound like this: PFF. And then I, in my peripheral vision, I see this white light going by. And then one of my girlfriend's cousin says this thing, I will never forget this thing that she said, it was, "drop the fucking umbrella!"

So I throw the umbrella to the ground. There's smoke coming off the top. And I realize I have just been struck by lightning.

Now, when you're an inside person something people say to you sometimes is, “what are you afraid of going outside? You think you're going to get struck by lightning?”

But, I also have this other thought in the immediate aftermath of this and it was a thought I had never had before, which is I look around at all these people who I felt no connection with and I think, “I have to take care of my family.” And I couldn't believe that I had that thought.

SAM: From Spoke Media and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. This week on the show, we bring you a blend of stories about inceptions and exorcisms. I'm Sam Dingman and this is episode 26: Spirit World. Coming up after the break...

JIM: And then I say to Ruby Bell, “you know what I can't believe? How some people squander their curiosity on BS like signs of the paranormal.” And Ruby Bell looks at me and she says, you're going with me to see the Marfa lights tonight.

SAM: We'll be right back.

[AD BREAK 1]

SAM: Welcome back to *Family Ghosts*. Our first story this week comes from Jim O'Grady, who told it at one of our *Family Ghosts* live shows last summer.

JIM: So, um, it's the late nineties, and I'm on winter vacation in Fort Davis, Texas. If you happen to grow up in a small town with only one stoplight, that is 100% more stoplights than Fort Davis, Texas. Um, if this place ever had a hay day, it is over. And I remember we're staying in this sort of Western themed old timey hotel and I went out walking to just take in the place and I remember standing there thinking, “Oh, this is the kind of town where the cattle is lean and the Cowboys are

fat.” Fort Davis, Texas, winter vacation. I'm there with my wife, Anna. It's the, uh, it's the kind of trip you endure because you're married. Or at least that's what I believe. I believe I'm married.

We're there with her mother, my Texas mother-in-law, Ruby Bell. Proper, dignified, hair in a permanent soufflé. Oh, and a woman who viewed everyday life through a veil of Gothic Horror. For example, she'd come back from the supermarket, I'd be helping her put away the groceries, and she would turn and say to me, “you remember Polly?” And I'd say, “no.” And she'd say, “Polly. You remember, her son went up the roof one day to pull a dead squirrel from the gutter and he fell and he impaled himself on the spike of an iron fence. He lived, but he seldom ventures forth anymore because he's hideously disfigured.”

I'm not from Texas, I'm from Yonkers. In Yonkers, we have separate categories for anecdotes about cream cheese and tales of maiming and near death. We do not mash them together like Ruby Bell did all the time. And I, to this day I still think about how she did that. So we're, now we're in the dining room of this busted old hotel, Anna and me, Ruby Bell and her second husband, and Ruby Bell is carrying on about the spirit life. And the way Ruby Bell talks about the spirit life, it's like a country club she belongs to and visits regularly. And so I sort of t- turned to Anna to get a quick eye roll, but she doesn't look at me. And now I wonder, again, why do I love her? We met years before at a protest in Staten Island actually, and I admired her. I admired her story of how at age 18 she actually wriggled free from the grip of her mother, got herself to New York and made a life and I admired her sense of justice. But lately I have this feeling of her slipping back into the orbit of her mother and Ruby Bell's disapproval of me. So that when I order a second glass of wine, they roll their eyes at me.

I down that wine, order another, down that one. And then I say to Ruby Bell, “you know what I can't believe? How some people squander their curiosity on BS like signs of the paranormal.” And Ruby Bell looks at me and she says, “first of all, young man, it is unseemly to use profanity on vacation. Second, you're going with me to see the Marfa lights tonight.”

Now the little town of Marfa, Texas is famous for mysterious green, yellow lights that appear in the deep of night along the horizon. Nobody knows who it is. Is it, is it- or what it is. Is it spirits? Is it aliens? Is Jesus a flashlight looking for the outhouse? Nobody really knows. The fact of the matter is, the lights are faint, so if you want to see them, it helps to believe in them first.

Ruby Bell believes. Many times she's told me how she'd be walking through her house, turn a corner and there in a door frame is the ghost of her late husband, Wayland. Stretching his leg straight up over his head the way he used to do.

She loves this vision. She loved Wayland. She loved his straight up leg. She loved being married to him. Unlike the man she's currently married to. Ruby Bell can tell a good couple from a bad couple, and so that's why when she looks at me and Anna, she can sense that the light of our marriage is fading. So now we're in the car in the dark of night, driving toward Marfa, and there's these little fingers of snow going across the road. And I have a feeling, well, one thing I know about Ruby Bell is she also believes that vows are unto death. And I have the feeling that I might not make it.

So I kind of try to hint at this to her in a very indirect way. As we're driving, I say, listen, Ruby Bell, I gotta be honest. I'm not expecting to see the lights. And she clenches her jaw and she's gonna give it to me. And then bang, we hit something in the road. Ruby stomps the brakes, spins the wheel, turns around, drives back, stops, and they're in the headlights, is a vulture with a crooked, ruined wing. And we're just looking at it and she says, "we are going to help that bird." And by we, she means me. And by help, she means I'm going to get out of the car and crouch down in front of a wild wounded animal with sort of entrails stuck to its face. And I'm going to do what? I'm gonna- I'm sort of like, I'm there and I'm sort of Taekwondo-ing it and then I hear a car door open behind me. Footsteps on the pavement. Ruby Bell sweeps past, goes up to the vulture, grabs it, carries it off the road, deposits that vulture in darkness. We're back in the car. We're driving in

silence. Ruby Bell says, “vultures are useful creatures. We do not give them enough credit for tending to the dead.”

We reached the spot. She pulls over, cuts the engine, and we're sitting there just looking out over this blackened wasteland. I know that my relationship to Anna does not have long to go. I don't yet know that ending it will feel like a death. I say to Ruby Bell, “listen, I understand why people want the line to be thin between this life and whatever comes next. We want to keep our loved ones close to us. We want our relationships to continue.” And she says, “that's right. Now you tell me where is the harm in that?” And then she sits up and she says, “Oh, over there you see the light- Do you see them? They're right there.” And I look, and I see them. Or I say I see them. And where is the harm in that?

Thank you.

SAM: That was Jim O'Grady coming up...

SUSAN: My mom was the kind of person who was a big believer in the afterlife. Or at least she really wanted to be. And so she wanted to know that there were ghosts and spirits and Poltergeist and she was always looking for evidence.

SAM: After the break, Susan's mom finds more evidence than she bargained for. We'll be right back.

[AD BREAK 2]

SAM: For our next story, we head East from Texas to South Georgia, where Susan Kent grew up in a house full of stories about death. Most of them told by her mom.

SUSAN: My mom was the kind of person who was a big believer in the afterlife. Or at least she really wanted to be. She wasn't like all of the Southern Baptists that I grew up around. Mom was more into the spooky shit. She liked the creepy things. And so she wanted to know that there were ghosts and spirits and poltergeists, and

she was always looking for evidence. And as a kid, I spent a lot of time going out on treks with her to find ghosts. So we'd go to the mausoleum in the woods, and we'd go to the Confederate soldiers section of the cemetery, and we'd go to Footsteps where, it was this trestle out in the middle of the woods where this man supposedly lost his head years before. And you drive out, and you park and turn everything off, and you wait. And eventually he walks by with a lantern looking for his head.

One of her favorite things was a ouija board. And again, she wasn't like normal people who played it like a, you know, another Parker Brothers board game. It was, she was serious with her ouija board and she was on a mission to find something out.

One time at a party with her best friend, they were playing, and she wasn't the kind of person who started out with the easy questions like, will it rain next week? Are there spirits here? Mom went straight to when am I going to die? Her best friend Cece was totally freaked out. She said, "Barbara, why would you ever ask something like that?" And mom started laughing. "Oh Cece, you're just crazy. Don't you want to know? Everybody wants to know when they're going to die." And Cece was horrified by the idea and was just like, "Barbara, just don't even talk about it anymore. I can't talk." And mom said, "girl, it's going to be hard if I die first because I'm going to haunt the shit out of you."

And Cece freaked and was like, "Barbara, you, just please don't even say that. I don't want to hear that." And once mom realized that she was serious, they made a pact, mom said, "all right, listen, I will promise that if I die first, I will not haunt you, if you promise that if you die first, you will haunt me."

About eight years later, Cece was diagnosed with a brain tumor and the cancer took hold really quickly and she died a couple of years later and that was in December of 1978. And as upset as mom was that her best friend had died, she was also on a mission looking out, cause she knew Cece would be back.

After Cece died, her mother gave me a crucifix that used to hang in Cece's bedroom and mom took it and hung it in her own bedroom. And for years we were always on the lookout for any sort of symbol or sign that she was around. So for years, every thing, any weird interaction we had, any sort of strange light that would happen or things would go missing or the dogs would stare at the wall, it was Cece and we just knew it was her. Still, there was never solid evidence.

When I was 16, I was at home by myself, getting ready to go out with some friends of mine, and I was getting dressed. And the way you got dressed at my house was you get everything ready in the bathroom and you get your hair and your makeup done, and then you go to mom's bedroom where the only floor length mirror was. So you'd have to stand on my mom's bed and look back at her dresser where the full length mirror was. I went into mom's bedroom and stepped up on the bed like I always did, and before I was able to get up and turn around to the mirror, I saw the crucifix and there under Jesus's left arm at a 45 degree angle, was written Cece in green letters.

And I completely freaked out and threw myself against the dresser and went running down the hallway and started trying to dial the phone frantically trying to get to my mom. Took four times to dial it right, and finally she answers at the flower shop where she worked, "hello, this is Creations. Barbara speaking." And I just screamed and cried in panic. "Oh my God, Oh my God, what's going-" "Ah!" You know, just screaming. And finally the one word mom heard was Cece. And she was like, "Susan, I thought you were being killed. What's wrong with you? It's Cece? Why are you upset? We've been waiting for this for years. She's here?" And I was still crying and panicked and upset that she wasn't as upset as I was, that there was a ghost writing on the wall. And so she just said, "Susan, calm down. Call your friend, have them come pick you up. I'll be home later."

So when mom got home that night, she went into her bedroom and she stood in front of the crucifix and she started crying. And she pulled out some old letters that Cece had written and checked the handwriting. And the signature was the same. And she looked at me and said, "Susan, you know how important this is to me.

This isn't funny. If this is a joke, you need to let me know.” And I did my best to reassure her that I hadn't done it. I was crying and scared and had to leave home. I just couldn't understand why she didn't believe me, especially for somebody who had been just waiting her whole life for pure sign of the afterlife.

Cece's name was written in green on the wall, and afterwards mom spent days searching our house for every green marker, pen, crayon, eyeliner, anything that would make a green mark and she made all these little hash marks underneath cc's name and nothing quite matched. A couple of weeks after I was getting ready to go to bed and I heard my mom screaming in the back bedroom and I went running back and she was on the floor and she was clutching this painting and just sobbing hysterically. I said, “mom, what is going on? What- Are you okay? What has happened?” And she just held the painting up and turned it around.

[music]

On the back of the painting there was tag, and mom had written a note on it that said, “is it you? I hope so. I love you.” And written on it in the same green, in the same handwriting, at the same 45 degree angle, was just the simple word, “yes.” I found out that night that mom had written that note two weeks prior, hidden it there, hadn't told anybody and had checked it every single night. And that was the night that she discovered it. And still she wasn't sure that it was really Cece.

Years later when I went home to see my mom, after she had been put on hospice care due to her own bout with cancer, she was in a morphine haze most of the time. But one day she woke up, and we were talking and had a great afternoon. We looked through pictures and we sang showtunes and before she drifted back off to sleep that day she looked at me and she said, “Susan, I know what's about to happen and- and you can tell me the truth now.” And I said, “what are you talking about mom?” And she said, “Susan, you can tell me the truth about Cece.” And looking at her lying in that hospital bed, it was amazing to be able to tell her, honestly, “I've been telling you the truth all along.”

SAM: That was Susan Kent. Coming up. Another very different story from the American South.

MEL Last August, I ended up in a sardine can of a tour bus, being driven over the highway and through the swamps. I am voluntarily going toward a place that my family has fled. I'm headed to an American forced labor farm. I'm headed to a plantation.

SAM: *Family Ghosts* will continue in a moment.

[AD BREAK 3]

SAM: Ghost Family, very often in episodes of our show, you hear people coming to terms with the fact that the stories they've been raised on about who they are and where they come from, aren't quite what they seem. Over the generations, the people in their families who told and retold those stories have omitted certain facts, elided certain characters, or maybe just zoomed the scope of the story as far in as they can, so that certain details lurking just beyond the lens of the camera don't interfere with the story they'd prefer to tell. It's hard enough when those choices are made by people in your own family. But when your family is denied access to its own story, those choices are still made by the unseen editors of history. For our final segment this week, here's Mel Powers at our season three launch party, telling the story of a fateful bus ride.

MEL: Thank you. Every family has a story. For some families, that story is about international jewel thieves. Uh, my big family story is about the time that my little sister took a piece of paper, she rolled it into a really thin tube, and she shoved it so far up her nose she had to go to the ER to get it out. Twice. If my family history is a giant leather bound book, the first 300 pages of it had been ripped out and lost to time. Which is how last August. I ended up in a sardine can of a tour bus, being driven over the highway and through the swamps. I am voluntarily going toward a

place that my family has fled. I am headed to an American forced labor farm. I'm headed to a plantation. Like every other black family I knew in the 70s and 80s, we had a copy of Roots on our bookshelf. Against all odds, Alex Haley, the author of Roots, had found his family's entry point to the United States. In 1767 a 17 year old named Kunta Kinte was kidnapped from Gambia and sold into slavery. And in 1976 his fourth great grandson published a book about the chain of people that connected the two of them. I was a kid and all the grownups around us were talking about Alex Haley's Roots, and everybody wanted to know their own roots, but nobody had any information. This was before ancestry.com and in the 70s and 80s, ordinary black folks didn't have the time or the money to head down to the national archives and to look through bills of sales for traces of Africa. The family Bible was your ancestry.com and if you didn't have one, then you were out of luck. So we were out of luck. So everyone adopted Alex Haley's roots as a stand in for their own.

When it became a mini series, I remember being very small on the couch and sitting between my parents and watching as Kunta Kinte was chased through the forest, captured, chained and put on a ship to America. My home, sweet home. Being a little kid, I didn't really understand the context of what was happening. Um, I thought it was just another TV show like Sanford and Son. I remember my parents being very upset and I didn't quite understand the nature of why they were so upset. I mean, I was really young and so part of me thought that maybe they knew Kunta Kinte from down the block. But his clothes let me know that, you know, it happened a long time ago, so I, I just, I didn't have a real idea of why they were so upset. Um, on the playground at my black elementary school, my friends and I innovated a new form of tag.

We would name one kid as Kunta Kinte, and then we would chase them around the play yard, capture them and drag them home. I know, I know, right? But we didn't know any better at the time. Um, when we were older, our schools taught us terms like States' rights, and three-fifths clause, and other stuffy words that we were told had nothing to do with us now. We were taught about how the great men who founded our country did so on the ideals of Liberty for all. One of these great men,

Thomas Jefferson, said, “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.” That seems to be a common thread in this country. But I have an aching need to learn my past before I can have the luxury of forgetting it. Which is how I ended up on a bus leaving New Orleans.

I had profiled my fellow passengers as they got on. Okay, of the 14 of us, two others were women of color, so I felt like they might have my back if something went down. Um, I immediately relaxed though when the driver got on. There was a black man driving the bus. Figuratively and literally, a black man driving the bus! It was amazing! Um, his name was Kendrell and he was great at his job. He started out with um, some nice and slow jokes, you know, to put us at ease. He said to me, “hey, miss New York, if someone offers you gumbo made with nutria, tell him to fuggedaboutit!” His jokes weren't very good and neither was his accent, but the point was he was trying to make sure we were okay. But as we drove further into plantation country and as the air grew heavier and the traffic thinned out, he stopped being funny and he started getting real.

He informed us that a lot of us had been misinformed. And he began to weave stories about how brutal the chattel system of slavery had been. Here's what I do know about my family story. I am the descendant of people who were enslaved on American soil and that is the only thing I know about those people. My mother remembers her own great grandmother talking about being a child who was enslaved. But my mom always mentioned it in passing with the same weight that you'd talk about what you were going to have for lunch. She would say, “granny would talk to me about being a slave, but I would just say, uh huh.” Now I try to imagine this great great of mine. I imagine her trying to tell my mother what it was like to be a child who was enslaved. Was she sad or angry or did she really just want this fundamental part of her life experience to be remembered?

The week before I went to New Orleans, I read a story about how the Whitney Plantation was getting really negative reviews on TripAdvisor. Like, have you heard about this? It's crazy. So people were going on this tour of a plantation, and the tour guides were mentioning slavery, and people on the tour did not like that. In

fact, they thought it was really rude to be mentioning slavery on a plantation tour. So here's one of the quotes from a reviewer. Um, “my husband and I were extremely disappointed in this tour. We didn't come to hear a lecture about how the white people treated slaves. We came to get a history of a Southern plantation and get a tour of the house and grounds.” Right? I was really confused by this. So further sleuthing found out that this is a common complaint from people who, um, who go to these tours and complain. Um, some people go on these tours to see life like it was *Gone With the Wind* and they want to talk about frocks and finery and they're really put out when people start talking about slavery. On a plantation tour.

The tour I signed up for was going to stop at two different plantations, which told two different stories. Our first stop was the Whitney Plantation, the one that was listed in those reviews. The Whitney Plantation opened itself as a museum about five years ago, and it uses federal writers project interviews from the 19- from 1940 as the source for their material. Um, the formerly enslaved people who were interviewed in 1940 had been young children at the time of emancipation 75 years earlier in 1865. So these interviews were with people who had been slaves, but they had been children as slaves. Um, so the, the museum, uh, tells the story of the plantation from their accounts and it's harrowing.

The grounds are vast and beautiful. The first building we encountered was a church. I walked through the doors and there were groups of children just sprinkled throughout the church. And some were sitting in pews, some were cross legged on the floor in clusters of four and five. And it, it took me a second to realize that they weren't actual children. They were, they were actually life-sized sculptures of children. They were figures and they were dressed in rags and they were purposefully missing their eyes. Uh, we had been given a ticket printed with a picture of a sculpture, the name of the child it represented, and their story. And we were tasked with searching through all the room- through the room and the figures, and matching our ticket to that sculpture. You know, as I went through, I felt like I was looking for my great-great-grandmother. I found my little girl, her name was Francis Lewis, and this was a quote from her.

“When children used to get a whippin’, they was taught to turn around and say, ‘thank you ma'am, for whippin’ me’ and bow. That was mighty hard to do, but we were never allowed to pout. If we did, we got another.” I have two small children now and it's all I could think about as I was reading this. My daughter is seven and... It moved me more than I could say at the time. We walked out of the church and before I could take a minute to recover, we kept moving onto a little Grove that had a stone wall with etchings on it, which were more of the children's memories. There was the story a child told about a woman named Elizabeth Stokes who once had the prettiest teeth that anybody ever saw. Nobody knew why, but every day at 12 o'clock, her master would take her to the blacksmith's shop on the plantation, lay her head on the anvil and knock out one of her teeth until they were all gone.

There was an angel monument dedicated to the enslaved children who died on the property. There were reconstructed slave quarters. I was able to enter one and it was like an oven in the Louisiana heat and humidity. We were told about the precision that went into the location of the corridors to the big house, close enough to know that they were always being watched. Constant surveillance. We finished up our tour and went back to exit through the gift shop. Let's just say I did some emotional shopping. I got two pairs of earrings an African print handbag, three books, then I boarded the bus for our next plantation stop, which was Oak Alley. I felt very quiet in myself. Um, I was thinking a lot about my children and my great-great-grandmother and the children who lived and died on the farm and how we all on the same continuum.

Kendrell turned the ignition to start the bus. The engine went silent. He tried again. If it's possible, I think it was even more silent. The engine had died. We waited in the gift shop while Kendrell figured out what to do. I bought another pair of earrings. We were told the company would send another bus for us, but it would take at least an hour to arrive. I mean, the irony of being trapped on a plantation was not lost on me. I bought a necklace before, thank God, the credit card machine died. Finally, a bus from a rival tour company arrived to drop off some passengers before it would continue on to Oak Alley. Kendrell told the driver he'd owe him a

favor if he'd take us with them and he promised he'd come back to pick us up when he got a new bus.

I was literally traded on a plantation tour.

I got on the bus. Now on this particular tour, they had to choose between the Whitney Plantation and Oak Alley, so the driver had dropped off the Whitney contingent, so everyone who remained was the Oak Alley crowd. Did you know that Oak Alley was where Interview With a Vampire was filmed? Neither did I! Um, but our driver Jack, who happened to be white, was cheery and bright and filled with lots of fun facts like that. He tells us that Oak Alley's got the best gift shop and we should check it out. Um, we should know that Oak Alley's original name was Bon Sejour, or pleasant journey, depending on your point of view. And then things really took a hard left turn. In the course of the next 15 minutes, he told us many things, some of which I blacked out. What I do remember him saying is, um, he talked about how kindly a lot of the land owners had been and that one nice thing that the land owners would do was give their slaves Sundays off so they could gather at the park and play music and dance. And he literally said when they got their fiddles going, that must've been something else to see. I wish I could've seen that.

After emancipation, he said the good news was that the workers could get paid now and to help them out, the land owners would hold their money for them until they had accumulated enough to buy their own patches of land. I mean, he made predatory sharecropping sound like a positive thing. He also recommended a book that we could buy from the gift shop that didn't exaggerate everything like some of the other plantations.

I went from 12 Years a Slave to Gone With the Wind in a blink of an eye. History itself is a ghost. And I said nothing because I was now a guest on this tour bus. And the vibes were so different from the emotional but safe journey I'd had with Kendrell and at the Whitney Plantation. And while there were people from my original tour who had also been on that journey, there were also the 20 Interview

With a Vampire people that had not. And I was so upset and I wanted to speak out, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my voice steady the way I'd been trained to do, to be as unthreatening as possible, even in the face of insult. And my mother had instilled enough survival instinct in me and I had read enough negative reviews that I had a real fear that if I said something and my big and outraged voice, I think they'd kicked me off the bus. And the last thing I wanted to do was to be kicked off the bus in the middle of plantation and swamp country in Louisiana with not an Uber for miles. But what I really thought was about how the people who have the platform, who are driving the bus, are the people who get to choose the narrative of the story. So we get to Oak Alley, there is a gift shop, and it had a bed and breakfast, and mint juleps and souvenir to-go cups. And the big draw is a very big Gone With the Wind style big house that is centered on the property and canopied by 28 giant Oak trees. And I thought of all the people who worked under those trees a century and a half ago. While I was waiting for the tour to begin, I realize I am the only black person in line. I see girls posing on the veranda, making fish faces for their Instagram accounts, and I feel very lonely.

I recognize two Australian women from our tour with Kendrell. They wanted to know what was going on with the ride over to this one. And they couldn't understand why Americans seem to have a real problem talking about the truth of history. So our tour started and our guide is named Rhett. Yes, Rhett, I am not making that up. And he looks like a reasonable facsimile of the guy from Gone With the Wind. He has blue eyes and black wavy hair and an antebellum waistcoat, and really cuts a fine figure, I have to say. And I steel myself for a half hour of chat about China patterns and window treatments. But Rhett astonishes me. "Yes ma'am," he says to a guest, "that is a beautiful fan hanging over the dining table. And if you follow the long line of rope attached to it over to the corner, that's where a six year old Cora would have stood, pulling the rope to provide the breeze that cooled her owners and their guests."

Bless Rhett's heart. Every question that was asked about the glamour of the plantation was answered to include the people who provided the labor. It was like a tennis match. Someone would ask about the masonry and he'd lob back an answer

about the enslaved people who cast the bricks. Eventually the questions stopped coming and I gave Rhett a big fat tip on my way out. Kendrell did come back to pick us up, like he promised, and I was driven away from plantation life, even hungrier to find out more of my family's story. But for now I am proud to claim little Francis who endured at the Whitney, and young Cora, puller of the fan, to be stand-ins for great-great-granny and those who came before her. Recently on ancestry.com, the furthest relation I've been able to trace back to is my paternal great grandparents who lived in North Carolina in 1852. Just the date. No other details about the fabric of their lives. Yet. I know there's more to this story, to my story. And there's a little footnote to this story about stories. When I was writing this, I asked my Google home app- app for information on Kunta Kinte. So I asked the exact same question twice. I said, "what year did Kunta Kinte arrive in America?" So she gave me two different answers. The first was, "Kunta Kinte arrived on October 7th, 1767. He lived in obscurity and died a slave." Here was the second answer. "Kunta Kinte is also known as the slave who fought back. His story starts in 1767." But as we all know, his story started well before that. That's just when we started telling it. Thank you.

SAM: Mel Powers.

[music]

SAM: *Family Ghosts* is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman. With Vera Carothers, Soraya Shockley, Sally Helm, Odelia Ruben, Jenna Hannam and Janielle Kastner. The clip from my story that you heard at the top of the episode was recorded at a show called The Artichoke in Beacon, New York. It's hosted by a wonderful storyteller named Drew Prochaska, and you can learn more about it artichokeshow.com. Our storytellers this week were Jim O'Grady, who is also a reporter here in New York at New York Public Radio, Susan Kent, whose stories you can also hear on Risk and Snap Judgment, and Mel Powers, who performs with *Gravid Water* at the UCB here in New York and travels the country helping other people workshop their stories with The Moth. Mel is currently working on a podcast centered around the relationship between people of color, the stories of

their historical landmarks and their actual history. Our story editor is Mikaela Blei, who also coached Jim and Mel on their performances for our *Family Ghosts* live shows. 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, 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 episode. They get to listen to everything we make before anyone else. And this week they're getting a special bonus episode featuring two additional pieces on this week's theme from our *Family Ghosts* live show in Austin last summer. If you'd like to hear that along with the special extras that accompany all of our episodes, please consider becoming a member of the Kkindred Spirits for just \$5 a month at patreon.com/familyghosts. We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media. Find more great podcasts at spokemedia.io. Season three continues on March 4th. We'll talk to you then and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts*, where every house is haunted.

Next time on *Family Ghosts*.

When Toni's brother Larry died, her family just stopped talking about him.

TONI: In our family, it was like he ceased to exist. He was that entity that was always there. But nobody acknowledged it.

SAM: Toni was the youngest by far of six siblings, and not long after Larry's death, her older brothers all moved away, leaving Toni to navigate the silence on her own.

TONI: They weren't around. They had their own lives. They'd lived their own lives. They're making their own lives. And it was just me.

WOMAN: Did you have, did you miss them? Did you feel that lack?

TONI: I felt abandoned, for sure.

SAM: But a few years ago, Tony finally learned the real story of Larry's disappearance.

TONI: The breath got sucked out of me. That was not even something that had ever even entered my, my mind. Why didn't anybody tell me? Why? Why didn't I- Why didn't I know that?

SAM: And now that she knows the truth, she won't allow the silence to continue.

TONI: We never talked about it. I felt like it fractured us. He deserved, he does deserve a legacy. If it's not children or grandchildren... He deserves a legacy.

SAM: Toni resolves to keep Larry's story alive and put the pieces of her family back together. That's coming up in two weeks when season three of *Family Ghosts* continues.

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