

SAM: Hello Ghost Family. Welcome to our second bonus episode of the summer. I hope that you are listening to this episode at the beach or on a boat or - dream of all dreams - enjoying it with a frozen beverage while seated on a Lanai, which as alert listeners to the Chinese food incident are already aware are my new favorite thing. Things are busy as usual around here at family goes to HQ. As I record this, we've got producers fanned out across the country hard at work on our new batch of stories for season three which, as a reminder, is coming to your headphones this holiday season. I also want to thank all of you who came out for our live shows in New York and Washington D.C. last week and to let you know that we're planning another run of live shows this fall as we gear up for the release of season three.

If you'd like family ghosts to visit your city or town, please drop me a line at familyghostspodcast@gmail.com. I, of course, can't promise that we'll be able to make it work, but we're just starting our planning as we speak and I'd love to chat if you think it would be a good match. Also, we've still got time to read a few more story pitches and we're particularly interested in holiday themed family ghost stories. If you've got something that might be a good fit, send us a note at that same email address. Familyghostspodcast@gmail.com. Now speaking of live shows, on this week's bonus episode, the one you are listening to right now, I am excited to share two fantastic stories with you that were recorded at our very first family ghosts live show here in Brooklyn last fall. They are both great examples of the kinds of stories that we feature at those events.

Since we can't exactly have someone investigate a mystery from their family's past live on stage, the storytellers at our live shows are a little bit more free to explore the broad themes of familial legacy and lore, and what effect they've had on their lives. And this week we're featuring stories from two fantastic comedians, both of whom I've admired for a very long time. Plus a song so beautiful, it made a friend of mine punch me in the arm and say, Sam, you can't do that. Which isn't exactly fair 'cause I technically didn't do anything, the band did. Anyway, that's all coming up right after this short break.

SAM: Welcome back to the show. This week we're featuring stories from our first ever family goes to live show in Brooklyn last fall. And first up, it's a story from Gianmarco Soresi, who performs stand up all over New York city and was recently featured on the PBS storytelling series Stories from the Stage. Here he is on our show, live at the Bell House last September.

GIANMARCO: Hello. So, um, my parents got divorced when I was seven days old. So like most kids, my first word was “mama”, but my next five were “told me to tell you”. It was because my dad was adulterous. He prefers the term Italian. Um, and, and he was Italian on his father's side. Uh, my grandfather, uh, Carl Dexter Soresi. And I never met my dad's dad, which is a tradition I hope to continue with my son. Um, now the only thing I I I really knew about this man, my mom once accidentally let slip that my dad's dad had sued him once. So what happened, I guess my, uh, my grandfather gave my dad money. My dad said it was a gift. My grandfather said it was a loan. Which is why I never opened Christmas presents without my attorney.

He died, uh, about two years before I was born. And there was never any pictures of him around the house, but, but deep in the basement, like kind of behind the container of Christmas ornaments were these very cool looking three dimensional paintings. They were silver with triangles and circles that, that I guess my grandfather had made. He was an artist. Um, he was, he was a pianist. He was like, he was a man who knew how to use his hands. Um, he actually built the home that my father was raised in because he had a little construction company while he was moonlighting as a journalist. He was the kind of guy you, you had to sit down before asking him, “what do you do for a living?” Which is why he actually made most of his money from residuals because strangely enough, he wrote the lyrics to a very popular Rosemary Clooney song called If I Had a Penny.

Uh, but yeah. It's - the, the first line of it is, uh, “if I had a penny, every time I cried for you, I'd be a millionaire who's every dream falls through”, which is especially poignant because he left my grandmother penniless when he walked out on them after a six year affair. And now I, I didn't know about this part until I was much

older. It's very hard to keep track of your family tree when it keeps splitting. It starts to look like a pile of firewood. It wasn't until actually my grandma passed away that my aunts and uncles and dad had pretty much a bonfire of my grandfather's memory. They told me that my grandfather used to beat his children. He was a man who knew how to use his hands. He once taught my uncle to box and, and when my uncle, when he put his thumb too high in his forefinger, he grabbed his hand and bit his thumb as hard as he could, leaving a scar. I found out one of the reasons If I Had a Penny became such a popular song is because he forced his kids to write postcards to every radio station in America requesting them to play it over and over and over again.

And my dad, who rarely talked about his father, told me that, that he would bring my dad when he would visit his mistress and leave my dad waiting in the car until he was finished.

And I wish that my dad had told me this sooner because it, it helped me find forgiveness for my father. I mean, compared to my grandfather, my dad was the world's number one dad. Like, sure. He had once slept with my kindergarten teacher, but he didn't walk out on me. But for all the improvements that my dad made on his upbringing, the one thing that was almost identical was, was my dad's marriage to my mom. I mean like my grandfather, my dad cheated on my mom. There were battles over alimony payments, and when all the dust was settled, they never spoke again.

So I thought growing up, should I ever fall in love with someone, if I, if I really met someone that I wanted to keep into my life til death do I part, the last thing I should do is marry them. So when I fell in love in college, I already was coming up with an exit strategy. It was this girl for now, we'll just call her Laura. She was an actor and she was like, she, she looked like Audrey Hepburn, but had the mind of an Annie Hall. She had these big nerdy glasses that like that, that magnified her slight Hazel eyes that would nearly disappear every time she smiled and she smiled every time I walked in a room

And all I wanted - all I wanted was to make sure that those eyes never looked at me the way that my mom looks at my dad. So when we graduated, I broke up with her. And she, she moved to LA and instead of dealing with my feelings, I backpacked around Europe for three months, just me, a copy of Infinite Jest and 93 condoms and- and I went everywhere. I started in Italy, then I went to, I went to Germany, I went to Amsterdam, I went to Paris, I went to Dublin. The last stop was Interlaken Switzerland, and then I felt the way I do at the end of every trip, like I just felt like I had wasted the whole thing. Like I was only halfway through the Infinite Jest preface. I'd only use two of those condoms... and it was on my feet. One of the hostels had this shower that was just, it was horrifying.

I lost my sandals in Amsterdam a little... And the whole trip, the whole time, all I could think about was Laura. I thought, did I make a mistake? Should I call her? Apologize, ask her to marry me? But that's when I saw a brochure for skydiving and I thought, oh, I'll just do this instead. Because, I don't know if you noticed, but Interlochen is the number one place for skydiving according to that brochure. And so I signed up to go, uh, tandem jumping the next day. Tandem jumping is where you're strapped to someone who's brave on your behalf. And I, I even, I even paid extra to have a second person jump out and film me. So you know, in case something goes wrong, at least I can finally go viral and, and I was nervous, I was nervous, but I was holding it together until later that night. This, this couple from Japan, they were on their honeymoon, they had gone skydiving earlier that day and, um, they, they played, they got to film too, they played it in the, the common area TV. And if you've ever seen a skydiving video, they're all the same. It's all underscored by like Metallica that were done by kids bop. And, and when, when the person jumps, there's always the same three phases every time. One is just, they're terrified because they just jumped out of a fucking plane. But then that's quickly replaced by this like feeling of joy that they're in the sky and they're moving through clouds and, and the pride that they had the chutzpah to, you know, do this, yeah chutzpah, and they, that they had the courage to do this. And then third, no matter who it is, no matter who it is, it's so dumb. They always look right at the camera and they're just like, I'm a bird. And it's ya know, you're not flying. You're falling. Okay?

And I'm watching them watch themselves on the TV, seeing what I'm going to do in about 12 hours. And I ran to the bathroom and threw up because I can't skydive. I've never been bungee jumping. I've never been, I haven't even been rock climbing. This is like going scuba diving, you never took a bath. So instead of going to sleep that night, I decide to Skype with Laura. Which I know, smart. And I, I, I basically beg her to give me permission to not jump. And this is the first she's heard about any of this. So she's just like, oh, okay, don't jump. Which made me furious. I was like, could you push me please? Could you help me be a better braver man, and she was like, oh, okay, okay, you should jump. Which made me furious. I was like, are you crazy? If I die, this is on you.

So we go back and forth jump, don't jump, jump, don't jump until I'm finally weeping. And I say to her, okay, I'll jump, but I just want you to know if anything happens to me, you will be the last thing I am thinking about. And then I have to go because the vans there to pick me up. We'd been Skyping for seven hours at this point. So I, I say my possible last goodbye to her. I even kissed the camera, it was gross. And I get into the van, there's three other guys going skydiving that day and they're actually, they're in the army. They just got back from Afghanistan and they are more scared than me. And I was like, guys, you can't be scared. You were just in Afghanistan. They're like, yeah, that was crazy, but this is insane! And the driver looks at you, the back row of these four men holding hands, just shaking with each other. He's like, guys, guys, relax. You're more likely to die on this car trip right now than you are skydiving, which only made me want to get out of the van even more.

So he gets to the airfield and they dress us in the traditional neon orange jumpsuit. I think it's in case the parachute do- doesn't go off. It helps them find the body in the woods. And we, we get onto the plane. It's a tiny plane. I mean it could fit on half this stage. It looked like it was made by hot wheels. And so we're going up, we're going up 10,000 meters in the sky. And, and I tried to distract myself by getting to know my tandem jumper. His name is Eben, he's Australian. He looks like he was born wearing Oakleys and I, I'm just talking to him, getting to know

him. I was like, hey man, you married? He was like, Nope. I said, oh, do you have a girlfriend or boyfriend? Nah. Any pets? Nah. If I disappeared, I don't think anyone would notice. Time to jump. Boom, he kicks open the door and now I'm sliding to the door straddled by possibly a suicidal skydiver and my legs are like dangling over the front of the plane and I'm thinking like, I can't do it. I'm going to tell them we're going to land the plane. I don't need a refund. It's fine. When all of a sudden I think something in my brain snapped because I heard a voice in my head that said, you can't die, Gianmarco, you're the main character.

Three, two, one. We jump! And guys, let me tell you, you gotta go skydiving. It was amazing. I was joy. It, it was raining, but we were above the clouds. So I was raining onto the rain. And then I did this thing - it was so cool. It was so cool. So the camera mans across to me, it was so funny. I looked right at the camera and I was just like, I'm a bird. It was, you had to be there, and, and that, you only free for like 30 seconds. And, and you know, Eben pulled the parachute, thank God. And we're, we're floating. We float down for like 10 minutes and, and I can see the Swiss Alps. It's beautiful. And the first time in so long that, you know, I haven't had my fucking cell phone to distract me. It's just me alone with my thoughts and Eben. And... I finally realized like, what the fuck am I doing? I obviously obviously want to be with Laura. And getting married has nothing to do with being like my dad or his dad. If I want to really be different than them, then maybe I should commit to someone that I love. So the moment we land, I threw up everywhere. It had been a very long, stressful day.

But after that, I get on the phone and I call Laura, but she doesn't pick up. So, you know, I call her again, it doesn't pick up. And I, I find out later that the reason that Laura didn't pick up the phone is because she was actually at a friend's birthday party where she was meeting for the first time her now husband, the now father of her two children. Because life doesn't wait until you're ready to jump. Thank you.

SAM: Coming up, storyteller Gastor Almonte has a run in with some birds of his own. We'll be right back.

SAM: Welcome back to this week's bonus episode. For this installment of our bonus episode series, we're playing you stories from our Family Ghosts Live Show at the Bell House in Brooklyn last fall. And next up, a story from Gastor Almonte, another excellent standup based here in New York. He's been featured on Comedy Central and just recently put out a truly hilarious standup album called Immigrant Made. Here he is performing on our show

GASTOR: I'm from East New York, Brooklyn. Y'all been there before? For real? Huh, no doubt. Yeah I got a eight year old son and the neighborhood's changing a little bit. You know, we uh, we got white people moving to my neighborhood. Like before Starbucks, it's crazy. And you know, I love y'all, y'all are cool, but I'm having trouble explaining some of the things y'all do to my son. You know, he came home from class and he was like, "yo dad, you know, snack time at school, the kids was eating beef jerky. What's beef jerky?"

And I challenge you to make that make sense to a eight year old Dominican kid. I say, "well son, you know how, you know, we eat chicken, you know, eggs and fish most of the time. Sometimes I splurge and we have steak and it's juicy and tender. It tastes great." And he's like, "yeah dad it does." I was like, "so white people like to take that, and everything you like about it, they take it out, and instead of having it for dinner like once a week, they cut it up into little pieces and just tolerate it for a month."

And he was like, "dad, when a break, you know, I told my friends we were goin' to Florida, and they were tellin' me they're goin' skiing. What's skiing dad?"

See some y'all are ahead of me on this. I was like, "Well, son. You know how it's real cold outside so we try to keep you in to protect you? White people would like to look for the most dangerous days in mother nature schedule to go outside. You know how it's really difficult to walk outside and the streets are flat? They like to go to the highest point, and add stick to their shoes for some reason. And you know how you get real slippery and sometimes you fall down and you try to avoid that? Well they try to do it on purpose, gracefully."

And it's all marketing. If you would just change like little things, like if you would be like, "hey Gastor, you want to play a sport where you get to wear Timberland boots and Northface jackets all the time?" That's the blackest shit I heard. Yes, I am interested. Ya know, sounds great.

But I appreciate that he still comes to me for these questions. As you can see, I'm not that great at answering them, but he still trusts my logic. I'm still a source of knowledge for my son. That's beautiful to me cause that, that something, that's not something that's going to last forever. You know, I actually saw my grandfather lose that, you know, lose being the authority figure. I remember when I was seven years old, he moved here from the Dominican Republic and I was excited cause I was seven years old, you know, I wanted to do a whole bunch of stupid shit. And he was this old man that also wanted to do stupid shit. Like all grandfathers should. Right? You know, like I'd be like, yo, yo grandpa, can we play tag on Atlantic Avenue? Like of course. Can we have peanut chews for dinner today? Why not, Gastor? How many firecrackers can I light at once before we should run away? Let's find out.

The world is your oyster, Gastor. He also had these cool sayings, he'd be like in a battle between a goat and a cow, the winner is the chef.

I still don't know when to use that adage. But it seemed important to him, so I hold it dear. You know.

But I was excited he was here in town, you know. But your grandfather and your grandmother, those are the first people you see that are in charge and then they stop being in charge. Everyone else, your parents, your teachers, cops, you see them in charge, they're in charge the whole time you're a kid, you know. And it was, it was weird to me to see this guy, you know, do stuff and get in trouble for it with his kids. You know, like my cousin Geo, he was 10 years old, he wanted to roller blade down the stairs of the building. He ain't make it. So my uncle, he runs up to my grandfather, he's like Luciano, you, you can't let the kids rollerblade down the

stairs, they gonna get hurt. He broke his arm. And my grandfather was like, well we know that now.

He believed in us, you know. It was touching to me, you know, so I always enjoyed on Sundays we'd go to my grandmother's house, 'cause now my grandfather was there too. So you know, my aunts and my mom would do their hair. My dad and my uncles would sit on the stoop and talk smack. And my grandfather would hang out in the front of the yard and watch me and my cousins, you know, do recklessness on the block. It was great. Three weeks into this routine, you know, this is my uncles and my dad and some of the neighbors on the bonus on the house and they complaining about the break-ins. You know, we had three break-ins on my uncle's block. Some people had some stuff stolen. Motorcycle was taken. They riffin' and complaining. My grandfather starting to get frustrated with his kids. Finally he turns around and he looks at them dead in the face. He's like, you know what y'all need to do? Y'all need to buy some chickens. You see how quiet you guys are right now? See the confusion you feel? You are not alone in that feeling.

They looked at him stunned, they like, you know, what are you talking about chickens? And my grandfather started having a conversation like this was a logical thing to talk about. He's like, why should we get chickens? And my grandfather was like, oh cause chickens don't lie. Chickens tell the truth. And then he turned around like, yeah, I'd made my point.

I've tried my whole life to mimic the confidence that man showed that day. To look at a group of 30 to 40 year old homeowners, professionals, hard workers. And tell them, yo, you know what the solution is to your crime wave problem? Poultry.

So you know, they dismissed my grandfather like yeah, whatever. You know, old man's bugging out, and they keep riffing about the situation. My grandfather keeps looking at his plate but finally he gets heated. He calls us all and he's like, kids, I need y'all to play inside the yard. I got to go do something. He walks off, comes back half hour later with a cage with four chickens.

Now I know that's not that surprising now. Brooklyn has changed a lot. I'm sure somewhere near here there's like a hand-to-farm, free range, artisanal chicken place. But this is 1990s East New York, Brooklyn, one block off of the J train on Fulton. My uncle's been here thr- my grandfather has been here three weeks. He doesn't speak a lick of English. Where the fuck do you go to get four chickens?

Like if you sent me out to get chickens now like I'ma come back running just cause I'm assuming I committed a crime. He comes in proud. He looks at his kids. He's like, I got the chickens.

Opens up the cage, lets them loose in the backyard and they start laughing but they let it rock. He decides to keep doing this, next three weeks he gets three, four more chickens at a time. Month in, we got 15 chickens in the backyard. Now I'm from Brooklyn, as I said, I don't know much about farming, I'm assuming most of y'all don't either. I'm going to let y'all learn something today. I know one thing about chickens now, chickens are incredibly good at doing one particular thing. They're really good -pardon me- they're really good at making more chickens

Six months in. We have like 150 chickens. Like if you got an adjacent house to my grandfather's house, you have chickens. Front yard chickens, backyard chickens, Atlantic Avenue chickens. Like y'all go to Nets games on Atlantic Avenue, two miles away, there was chickens. People started complaining there's property damage. You think you get mad when a pigeon shits on your car? Imagine when a chicken does it. Because chickens don't fly. That means he got on your car. Just to shit on your car. Yeah, after six months people kept, you know, they can't hold it no more. They're like, yo, we got to have a meeting. So the whole block gathers in my grandfather's living room. They talk to my dad, they talk to my uncles and they go, you gotta talk to him. My dad starts it off. He's like, "listen Luciano, we're really happy to have your home. I know you miss being back in DR. I get that. So we let you have a couple chickens. But this chicken situation is getting out of control, right now. We gotta be at 300 chickens at this point, sir." My grandfather looks at them stunned. He's like, "I don't want any chickens. You guys were

complaining about robberies. I brought chickens into the house. Nobody on the blocks been robbed since. You're welcome.”

And then he left the room.

So again, they just let it rock year in, you know, letting these chickens grow. Everybody's okay with it. Security's top-notch now. Year later we got to be at like a thousand chickens at this point. Block is flooded with chickens. Have you ever had a drug dealer ring your bell to complain about the chickens? My father lived that moment. They oh sir, we respect you, we respect your father-in-law, but the chickens are making it real hard to keep our business low key.

Admittedly a fair critique, you know, but it was helping so they kept letting it go. Finally a few weeks pass and on a Saturday morning I wake up in my house and I hear my parents kind of like rumbling, getting ready, it's early, it's like five in the morning, and I sense like, that there's a lot of panic and energy. I walk out, I'm like, “what's happening?” And they're like, “oh, there was a break in at grandpa's house. We're going to go over there and make sure everything's okay.” And I show up and I see cops around the block. I see the neighbors outside lookin'. And I see a guy getting arrested and put in a car, and I witness what might be my favorite conversation ever. Police officer and my dad talked, and a police officer said this, he's like, “so you guys brought the chickens here on purpose? 1500 chickens.” And my dad answered the way that my grandfather had taught him, with logic that only make sense to him. He's like, “no sir, don't be ridiculous. We only brought in three to four chickens at a time.”

So the cop is like, “how'd you get this many chickens then?” And he's like, “well, I don't know if you know anything about chickens, but they're incredibly good at making more chickens.” And then he's like, “so what went through this? How did the chickens help?” He's like, “well, again, sir, the guy was trying to break into our backyard. He took some stuff. He tried to run away, he tripped on the chickens. I don't know if you've ever woken up a chicken before. It makes a loud noise. That gave us time to run outside and call you and now we here.” The cop was like, “he's

like 6'2, 200 pounds. You tripped on one chicken? Chickens are real short.” And my dad's like, “you right sir. You'd think it'd be hard to trip on one chicken, but we have like 1500 chickens. We got a system going here.”

Finally, I got to see what's going on. I go inside 'cause I don't see my grandfather. This is his moment. I'm like “yo grandpa,” and I see him sitting in the living room, on his throne and I'm like, “grandpa, how'd you know this chicken thing was going to work?” He's like, “you know nobody asked me. You know, when I was 25 years old, I lived in Bona0, this little farming town in the Dominican Republic. I was a sheriff and the town only had one rich person that lived there. He paid most of the taxes that covered my job. He had a break in and he told me that I had to stay at his house if I couldn't solve it until I caught the criminal. I lived three miles away walking. I wasn't going to do that. I'd be away from the kids and my wife. So I just got a whole bunch of chickens. I put them in the hallway and when the guy tried to break in again, his guards caught him. I figured it worked there and everybody know about chickens in DR. None of y'all know about chickens here.” I was like “that's incredible, grandpa.” He's like, “I know. I told you Gastor, chickens don't lie. Chickens tell the truth.”

I got my eight year old son now, as I told y'all. A few weeks ago, my two year old nephew Quinn's coming over and normally my, my son ignores him. You know, he's a little too young to play with him. But he's offering him a snack, he's trying to keep him calm. And he's like, “Quinn, what do you want? More crackers, you want chips? Oh, I got this new thing called beef jerky. My dad told me all about it.” And I realized then, my grandfather's goal. He didn't care about losing authority. He just wanted to live forever. And he lives forever through us. Thank you.

SAM: Coming up, one more excerpt from Family Ghosts Live at the Bell House last fall. That song that got me punched. We'll be right back.

SAM: Welcome back to the show. To close things out this week, I'm genuinely honored to share a song by Jocelyn Mackenzie, whose name I'm willing to bet

some of you recognize from her time as a member of the band, Pearl and the Beard. These days among her many musical adventures, she plays around Brooklyn with a band called The Peggy's. And we were fortunate enough to have The Peggy's join us last September for our live show at the Bell House. I first heard Jocelyn perform this song that she's going to sing at a totally wild variety show that featured music by The Peggy's as well as palm readings, a free jazz ensemble improvising based on the contents of fortune cookies, a confession booth on demand tattoos. It was all happening in the back room of this bar called Otto's Shrunken Head. It was a pretty noisy environment as you might imagine. But then out of nowhere The Peggys took the stage and Jocelyn stepped forward with her ukulele and started playing this song and suddenly everyone in the room went dead silent. The song is called Sick and Suffering and it's one of those songs that makes time stop. Jocelyn and The Peggy's performed it to open our show at the Bell House. But I think it makes for a pretty fitting closer as well. I hope you agree.

JOCELYN: I'm going to die. you're going to die.
how will you spend your time?
oh how will I spend my time?

oh the whisker I grow it won't bother me no more
when it grows six feet under ground.
and the shoes that I own that pinch my big toe
won't pinch the toe the tag hangs around.

I am sick and suffering
and I'm sure that that's not gonna change
just as sure as I'm older than I was last year
I got one more sweet toe in the grave —
and I don't let it make me afraid.

oh, decisions I made when I was 28
ham-fistedly getting unmade,
and it's frightening to know this is just the beginning
so I won't make no choices today.

I am sick and suffering

and I'm sure that that's not gonna change,
just as sure as I'm older than I was last year
I got one more sweet toe in the grave,
and I don't let it make me ashamed —

oh, I'd rather be hiding,
oh, I'd rather run,
oh, but nothing gets growing
when it's blocked from the sun.

I am sick and suffering
and I'm sure that that's not gonna change,
just as sure as I'm older than I was last year
I got one more sweet toe in the grave

and I'm not afraid
I'm not afraid
I'm not afraid

and I'm not ashamed
I'm not ashamed
I'm not ashamed

SAM: Family Ghosts is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman. Check out this week's show notes and your podcast app to find out more about Gianmarco, Gastor, Jocelyn and The Peggy's, the rest of whom by the way, also have non Peggy names, specifically Danny Drachsler, Charlotte Moroz, Jason Vance and Anthony Napoletano. This episode was mixed by Will Short, and Family Ghosts is a proud creative partner of Spoke Media. Find more great podcasts spokemedio.io. For even more bonus episodes of our show, please consider becoming a member of our Patreon community, the Kindred Spirits, where in addition to ad free versions of all of our past and future episodes, you'll also get early access to season three as well as even more bonus episodes that won't be available anywhere else. Next week, kindred spirits will hear my conversation with Jeffrey Nils Gardner, co-creator of the Unwell podcast. Sign up today to hear that conversation. Visit patreon.com/familyghosts, and we are truly grateful for your support of our work.

We'll be back next week with another bonus episode, and until then, thank you for listening to family ghosts where every house is haunted.