

SAM: Ghost Family, some of you may have noticed the quotes from song lyrics that I included in the show notes for each of our stories this season. I think of the songs, those quotes are from as sort of spiritual playlist for the season, but there's one song I really wanted to include and ended up swapping out at the last minute. That song is called Just Like Old Times. It's about a couple of hard luck drifters who've been friends for decades but haven't seen each other for awhile. In the song, they get an unexpected opportunity to reconnect and catch up on their adventures and remind each other why no one else in the world understands them quite like the other one. I think you can probably guess which episode I was planning to pull a quote from that song for.

Just Like Old Times is by Todd Snyder. One of my very favorite singer songwriters. I first heard his music about 12 years ago during my brief but eventful stint as a cab driver in New York, where I spent most of my time stuck in traffic on the West Side highway, listening to my favorite radio station, WFUV. The song of his that hooked me was Happy to be Here and the relevant lyrics were, “now I'm sure it's all true and I'm tired of this too, but I can't pray for someone to fall. Let all them people do what people do. I'm just happy to be here at all.” At the time I heard that, I'd been driving my taxi for about three months and inching along the West Side highway behind the wheel of a questionably maintained Ford Crown Victoria medallion number 3J93, was to be sure not where I'd expected to find myself four years out of college. And yet there I was in spite of all my plans, happy to be there. Or in the words of yet another Todd Snyder song, “a little out of place, a little out of tune, still lost in space racing the moon, climbing the walls of a hurricane still overall, I can't complain.” Anyway, ever since that moment when I first heard Todd, whenever my needle skips the groove and nothing else will put it right, I turned to his music.

There's something about it that helps me find my way back to myself. Not that I know what that even means really, but I suppose that what I love about Todd's music is that it's often about finding a way to exist in harmony with the unknowable. And that's exactly the headspace that I was in a couple of nights ago when I had the chance to see Todd perform on stage in Baltimore. And not only

did he play Just Like Old Times, at the end of the show he tossed his guitar pick into the crowd and bizarrely nobody reacted when he did it. So after the Encore, I elbowed my way to the front of the stage and scoured the floor looking for it - and I found it and I'm going to keep it forever.

On today's bonus episode, you're going to hear more excerpts from our recent run of Family Ghosts Live Shows. This week, two stories about moments when people find the mythology they were raised with disproved, but still find a way to appreciate the benevolence of the underlying myth. Plus a song about pretty much that same thing. That's all coming up after the break.

SAM: Our first story today is by Dr Njoki McElroy, who's been telling stories and teaching storytelling for decades. Dr McElroy performed at Family Ghosts live at the Texas Theater in Dallas. And just to set the scene, the Texas Theater is this majestic old movie house with a big marquee and lots of old heavy stone. And our show was actually performed behind the movie screen. So as the storytellers shared stories about the weight of legacy, there were larger than life shadows dancing on the back of the screen. Dr McElroy prefers to sit when she performs and she's one of those performers who doesn't have to do anything more than that to captivate an entire room. We just hand her the mic and listen.

DR MCELROY: I want to start by telling you that I'm in my old neighborhood. We lived eight blocks South of here on Jerden Lane. It was two blocks of blacks. We were surrounded by whites. And we were also excluded from the Texas Theater. We couldn't come in the theater. Uh, and nothing around here. We could avail ourselves, schools or anything. But anyway, we survived.

My grandfather, Jeff Washington, was a hero. And on the ninth day of May, he became a superhero. My grandfather had predicted that there would be an evil happening in Sherman, Texas due to the fact that black people in Sherman had advanced, had their own business district. They were well dressed and they were educated and they had professional offices downtown in their own section, and he said across the land as blacks - it was Negroes and coloreds then - he said, as

colored people advance, whites say they're uppity and they become demonized. Well, my grandfather was prepared for the evil happening. He had Colt 45s on every dresser and table in every room of his house, and a rifle standing tall in each, in a corner, one corner in each room. On Sundays, he put on his gold, put his gold pocket watch in his pocket and strapped his holster around his waist, going to church. And my grandmother said, "well, Jeff, why do you have to wear the pistols to church?" And he said, "well, you never know when I might need it."

I was born in that house, 1012 Natchez, and as a toddler I had full range of the house and I never, ever even thought of touching one of those guns. People would come in, they would be so afraid I was gonna toddle over and play with the guns, or try to touch it. I knew that the guns weren't toys and I knew the guns were for our protection. Now, when the evil thing happened, it started with John Hughes - a black man on one of the farms outside Sherman - was accused of raping a white woman. They brought him in to Sherman, put him in a cell, and the Lynch mob came, pulled him out, tied him to the back of a car and dragged him up and down the streets of the Black community. They ended up across the street from where the blacks had built all their good, nice buildings of businesses and they had doctors and the dentist and the lawyer's office. They were very proud of their two blocks of Mulberry Street.

They hanged John Hughes from a branch of a tree. They mutilated him and then they set fire to him. They brought their children and they brought lunches and it was a, like a huge celebration.

At the same time that the evil thing was going on, my grandparents at 1012 Natchez had made that place like a Fort. My grandfather passed out guns to the men. There were men, children, children, men, women had come to 1012 Natchez, just some of the blacks ran into the woods and hid, but a lot of them came to my grandfather's place for protection. He handed out the guns to them so that they would patrol the property and he told them, he said, "if any of these murderous cowards step foot on this property, they better be ready to meet their maker."

My grandmother and the women cooked and served food and sang hymns, and my grandmother had a collection of quilts, so she put the quilts out on the wrap around porch so the children would have a place to sleep that night. 1012 Natchez was an extraordinary place. It wasn't in the black community. It was in a section of Sherman on the Northern edge. And there was a ravine on the back of the property that separated my grandfather's property from the, well, the white people of Sherman. My grandfather had bought the property around 1900, and the original owner was a Confederate officer. And my grandfather had heard that the officer had buried a treasure chest of gold on the property and he was sure that he would find it - that the officer never came back to get the chest. I remember standing in the kitchen and there, there was a window that faced the back of the property, and I would- when they had these expeditions, I would stand there in the window and I would see these shadowy figures moving with their lanterns and their shovels and they were saying things that I guess meant that uh, chants or something maybe to give them a hint of where the gold was. In the mornings, I would wake early so I could see that big gold chest of gold and it never happened.

Well, during the summers, well, I, I spent a lot of time in, it a Sherman. My grandmother and I were very close. My grandmother was a very classy, refined woman and she was fun loving. So in the evenings we would put on our pretty, uh, summer dresses and we would walk up the Hill to the colored park, to, they had a colored band that played concerts. We went to the church socials, the suppers and the activities that the church offered. And my grandmother had friends who gave teas and parties, and my grandmother loved to entertain and she would have parties. So we really had a good time. I noticed, however, that my grandmother and my grandfather never went any place together.

My grandfather went to the Methodist church, my grandmother went to the Baptist church. My grandmother had her friends, my grandfather had his friends. And I also noticed that my grandmother was very happy, loving, kind, generous to everybody but Jeff Washington. He never did anything right for her. She even complained that he's... "Good Lord Jeff, you're standing all stooped over. Good-Land sakes! Straighten your back up. Stand up straight. Stand up like a man." My

grandfather never ever responded to her. She could rave and rant and he smoked a pipe and he would just sit there sometimes just puffing, smoke puffing around in the room and she's continually doing her thing. Well, when I became an adult, my grandmother told me a story, and I think she wanted to tell me the full story, but she just told me the part of the story. She said she was a young woman and her mother lived in Bryan, Texas, so she went down to visit her mother and she had a sister who was pretty wild. Her name was Cordelia. And Cordelia went out one night, came back very late, stumbled and fell on the porch, and was vomiting spiders. She had been poisoned and she died. My grandmother said, "instead of me coming home after the funeral, I decided to stay for weeks with my mother to comfort her." And then she told me, she said, "it's a mistake to leave a man alone for any length of time. And I stayed down there in Bryan, Texas, just too long. And don't you make the mistake that I made. Don't allow him to have the opportunity to find comfort in some other woman's arms." My grandmother said to my mother, "I want you to remember this. I should have been back in my home when I was in my mother's home." Well, that's all she told me about that, but then my mother- grandmother had passed and my grandfather had passed and my mother was in her seventies and I was in my fifties and I had come from Chicago to visit my mother.

My mother said that my grandfather had cheated on my grandmother, had a son by this woman, and worst of all, my mother said "this woman was the absolute opposite of my mama. She was the opposite in everything including looks."

That was the devastating thing, she said, that my grandmother couldn't, just could not take and she decided that she would give my grandfather hell the rest of his life. I have come to the conclusion that people make decisions when they are hurt in- a wounded- in grief, like my grandmother. She made the decision that she was going to hang on to some happiness and so she kept her social life and she, my grandfather fortunately was financially secure and so she had beautiful clothes and beautiful furniture and beautiful linen and beautiful goblets and she never ever had to go to a white woman's house and work. And so I feel that that was the way my grandmother dealt with it. She, she got her happiness from her life. My grandfather

gave her everything that she could ever want and she made up her mind that she was going to give him hell until he died and that's what she did.

My grandfather was our hero. My mother loved him dearly. She was devastated when she heard that he had done this deed. And he wasn't uh 100% good. He was human. Heroes are human. And one thing I can say, that Jeff Washington was 100% brave and he was 100% exciting.

SAM: Coming up. Another story about the complex benefits of mythology and a musical exorcism. We'll be right back.

SAM: Welcome back to this week's bonus episode. Next up, a story by Erin Barker, the artistic director of a great storytelling organization called the Story Collider. Story Collider shows feature stories about science. But a couple of weeks ago at Family Ghosts Live in New York, Erin shared a story about a time in her life that defied logic when her family expanded in ways she could never have predicted. Here's Erin live at the Bell House in Brooklyn.

ERIN: So, uh, when I was 11 years old, my mom sat me and my brother down and she said, "how would you like to move to England with me for a year?" Um, this was a big deal. My mom traveled a lot for work. She was usually gone like every week, Monday through Friday. I was the only kid in my Girl Scout troop who attended our mother daughter camping trip with her nanny. And this was the first time that mom had ever asked us to go with her on one of these trips. So it felt special. It felt like a big deal. Um, there were a few catches. We are going to have to leave some things behind. Uh, first of all, my dad was not going to come with us. Uh, his, his job was in America and he had to stay there. And that was hard because I was really close with my dad. He would read me a chapter from the Bible every night, and if we were good, we'd also do a Where's Waldo. So that was tough. And the other hard thing was that we were going to be leaving our church behind, uh, where I was a perennial Bible Bowl champion, not to brag. And to, our church was really important to us. So just to give you a, kind of an idea of how religious my family was, uh, we're not on the level of the people who dance with

snakes. Uh, but we were on the level where we didn't think those people were that weird. Like we'd say hi to them at the grocery store and be like, "Hey Greg, what's up? How are the snakes?" So we were very religious and my Christian friends, they were kind of all that I knew and I was a little bit scared to leave them behind.

You know, there were times when I'd be reading the Bible and I read about Jesus hanging out with like taxpayers and tax- tax collectors and uh, prostitutes and everything like that. and I think, you know, is that what I should be doing? Or to my parents ,or my teacher would say, "no, no, no, no. That's just for Jesus. For us it's better that we stay away from all those non-Christian influences so that we can stay safe and stay good Christians because even Jerusalem had walls around it." And that made a lot of sense to me. So I was, as scared as I was about the potential non Christian influences that might exist in England, mom assured me that they did have Jesus there, so it was going to be fine. And then she showed me a picture of the boarding school that we were going to be attending as day students on her employer's dime. And it looked very much like Hogwarts, so I was in. Um, so we landed at the Gatwick Airport in London and my mom's friend from work, Andy, picked us up. My mom had had friends from work before, like Roger who had a big bushy mustache and was always making us go out to the driveway to look at his car. Uh, but Andy was different. Andy was younger. He was like 10 years younger than my parents. He looked like kind of a Beatle Mania era. John Lennon, if John Lennon wore a lot of khakis and worked in software. And I could tell right away that he was not like a normal adult because his car had this sort of like layer of junk on the bottom of it and every time he stopped it would roll forward like an ocean. And I had never met an untidy adult before and I thought this was fascinating. And he was, he wasn't like an adult. He was like a grown up kid. He would build forts with us, he would watch Rugrats with us. He bought me my first, uh, cherished Spice Girls album. So we became really good friends and we went to Legoland together. We went all over the place and every Sunday he would come with me and my mom and my brother to church. So my mom explained to me that because Andy is our friend, it's our responsibility to bring him to Christ. Uh, which made a lot of sense to me because I cared about Andy. I didn't want him to go to hell like the atheist and the homosexuals. So, uh, and in school in England I was

finding myself kind of alarmingly popular based mostly on the fact that I was American, had an American accent, and had been to Disney world several times. So my classmates would crowd around me and they would demand to know about my rich and glorious homeland. They wanted to know was I from New York, Florida or California. And I was forced to tell them that I was from the in between space in a place called Ohio and they were very disappointed by that, which to be fair is a very appropriate reaction to Ohio.

I'd always thought it might be kind of fun to be popular. I'd never been popular before, but it, it was really just sort of disconcerting because these kids were not like my Sunday school friends at home. These were, they like all smoked. They were all basically on their third marriage. They were very different. I was really among the tax collectors and the prostitutes now. And when Andy would come and pick me up from school as he sometimes did, they would all kind of looking at him with their jaded eyes and they'd be like, "is that your mom's boyfriend?" And I said, "no, my mom's married to my dad." And they said, "but your dad's still in America." And I was like, "well yeah, but just for work." And they would kind of smirk knowingly and I didn't love that, but I knew that they were wrong because we were Christians, don't believe in divorce. Things like that didn't happen to people like us because God protected us from that kind of thing. I could remember when I was little, I was watching an episode of Sesame Street and they had one of those segments where they talk about like, different kinds of families, like some families have kids that are adopted, some families have parents that are divorced. Obviously I've found this terrifying, the idea that people could be different. And so I turned to my mom and I said, "mom, would you and dad ever get divorced?" And she just kind of laughed and said, "no, of course not, honey, we're Christians." And that to me was a binding contract. And so I was very confident, but even so I felt like those knowing smirks were sort of getting into my head a little bit. And so the next time we were spending the night at Andy's house, uh, which was this kind of like sparsely furnished bachelor pad with three bedrooms, I was laying there awake at night next to my mouth breathing little brother. And I decided, I have to know, I have to know tonight. And so I came up with a plan which bore an uncomfortable resemblance to my plan to prove the existence of Santa Claus, which was that I

was going to wait until I was sure everyone was asleep, and then because I knew which bedroom was Andy's, I was going to get up out of bed and I was going to go to the third bedroom and I was going to go in and see if my mom was there. And if she was there, I would know for sure that those heathens at school were wrong. And if she woke up, I just, I don't know, I'd ask for a glass of water or something like that. It sounded like a normal thing that a child such as myself might ask for in the middle of the night. And if she wasn't there, I would know that everything that I believed about the world was no longer true. So fingers crossed.

So I got up out of bed and I crept across the hallway, put my hand on the doorknob, and I took a deep breath and I forced myself to open the door. And the room was empty. There was nobody, there wasn't even a bed. Just boxes and papers and typical Andy mess. And so just feeling totally numb, I went back, I got back in the bed and I just laid there awake for the rest of the night, just counting down the minutes until breakfast when I could talk to my mom and she could explain. Because I knew that there had to be an explanation. She had said it herself, she was a Christian. Christians don't lie or cheat or get divorced. So when I heard my mom awake in the kitchen, finally, I went downstairs and I said, "hey mom, where'd you sleep last night?" Very casual, fair. And she kind of froze, crumpled halfway to her mouth. And she said, "I was in a guest bedroom just like you." And I said, "well actually I went into that room because uh, I needed a glass of water and uh, nobody was in there." And she doesn't look at me. But she says, "well, there's another bedroom that you just didn't see. And I was there."

And so in that moment I had a decision to make. Either I could accept the total collapse of my belief system or I could choose to believe in an invisible bedroom that I knew did not exist. And everything could stay the same. The choice was obvious. I didn't ask any more questions and I shoved this into a dark corner of my mind where I didn't have to think about it. But even so, it didn't stop me from becoming miserably unhappy. Sometimes in class I would just start crying for reasons that I couldn't really explain or understand. Eventually my dad brought me and my brother back home to the States mid semester so we could go back to our regular school. And during this time one day, my dad came and he picked me up

from school and he took me out for ice cream and that was when I knew things were about to get worse. My dad always takes us out for ice cream when he has bad news. Don't ever go to the Cold Stone Creamery with my dad. Don't do it unless you want to find out that your dog is dead or grandpa has cancer or that your nanny's been fired for stealing your mother's jewelry. Don't have ice cream with my dad. So we get our ice cream of doom and we sit down... And my dad tells me that my mother is pregnant with a baby that is not his.

And he says to me, do you know who the father is? And I realize that, yeah, I do know, I really know. And everything that I've been shoving back into that dark corner of my mind is now completely impossible to avoid. Especially when my mom came back to the States and she and Andy bought a house right down the street from my dad, together. As if the neighbors didn't have enough to talk about already. And our fellow church members started treating us like we had some kind of contagious disease. Neighbors whispered about us, or if my dad wasn't around, sometimes they would tell me in my face that my mom was a whore. I was at a friend's house once when his parents were having a party and his mother forced me to tell the story of my parent's divorce for her guests entertainment.

We weren't on the inside of those walls of Jerusalem anymore. And when you're not on the inside, it's like you don't matter except as a joke or a cautionary tale. And I wasn't ready to be on the outside of those walls. I had given 12 years of faithful Sunday school attendance. I have memorized so many Bible verses. I had devoted a lifetime to never saying any swears, not even the ones that are not that bad. And still I was on the outside of the walls, no better than the atheist and the homosexuals.

And... I was so angry. I don't know if you've ever seen a 12 year old who has a rage problem. That was me. Um, I was so mad that this perfect Christian life and this perfect Christian family and this perfect Christian Church had been taken from me and now all I was left with was just something that was broken, messy, and complicated. Case in point. I went down to my mom's house one weekend and I was confronted by the sight of a strange pink baby who I was told was my new

sister. “Do you want to hold her?” My mom asked. No, I don’t want to hold this baby. I don’t even want to look at this baby. This baby had ruined my life. I made a commitment in that moment to hate this baby for the rest of my life. Possibly longer.

Just one problem. I don't know if you've ever tried hating a baby. It's really fucking hard. It is legitimately difficult to commit to because everything babies do is just magical. And my little sister, Emma, was no exception with her little Pebbles Flintstone ponytail on top of her head. After a while my mom and I were bonding again over our mutual love for Emma and our mutual hatred for the Teletubbies. And I started to wonder if what had happened to us was really that bad. Especially because I discovered something very important at school, which is that something amazing happens when you're ostracized by the Christians, which is that you get to hang out with the atheists and the homosexuals. And it turns out they're a lot more fun. Who knew? I also discovered Jews during this time. Delightful. Really delightful.

And so now, uh, when Amanda Hines told me that my mother was a whore, I had all of these new friends to tell her to shut the fuck up and go back to journaling about her math teacher. It was great. It was so great. Um, and looking back on that moment, when I opened the door, I realized that I couldn't regret it. Because without it I wouldn't have Emma, wouldn't have my new friends, and I wouldn't have discovered what my faith really meant, what it was really about, which is not feeling superior, or feeling safe or protected behind those walls from anything that might be scary or bad on the outside. It's about tearing down those walls. It's about loving people despite their differences, despite their imperfections and having the courage to do that. And so I forgave my mom and I even forgave Andy. And a few years later when my mom discovered a soccer photo in, of a children's soccer team in the garage and realized eventually that Andy had been coaching his mistress's kid's soccer team for an entire season behind her back. I got to forgive him again. And again and again, many, many times, um, for all of the mothers and their children that he was going to church with now. And I got to forgive him again when he tried to take my mom's money in the divorce. That's how fucking Christ

like I am, everybody. I'm so full of fucking charitable forgiveness. All have fallen short of the glory of the Lord. I think we can agree some shitheads have fallen shorter than others. In a way, I, I owe a debt of gratitude to Andy because if he had never put his dick where it didn't belong, I might not be the person that I am today. I might not be the person who, when her little brother came out to her, was able to tell him that I love him and accept him the way that he is instead of yelling Old Testament verses at him. I might not be the person who protests things like concentration camps. Instead of looking the other way. I might not be the person who's bridal party was made up entirely of atheists, Jews, and homosexuals, aside from my maid of honor who was that baby that I once thought that I would hate forever. And all of this, I've realized, brings me closer to God and his infinite love, not farther away. Thanks

SAM: Coming up, the Gotham City Pickers cast out doubt and find strength in confronting the unknown forces that lie ahead, kind of like I feel ready to do every time I listen to Todd Snyder, we'll be right back.

SAM: So we always invite a musical guest to join us for Family Ghosts Live and we ask them to play songs between the stories that are inspired by the themes, the storytellers explore in their stories. And folks, I'm holding in my hands right now, the setlist from the Bell House show last week, and it says right here that before Erin told her story, I was supposed to introduce the Gotham City Pickers to perform their last song of the night, Get behind me, Satan. But just before that, I got really caught up in this story that I was telling the audience about the time I met what I believe was a literal ghost in the mountains of Arlington, Washington. It was subsequently pointed out to me that it's far more likely that this was a hiker. I am unconvinced. Anyway, I was so caught up in my story that I got the running order wrong and I introduced Erin before the band instead of the other way around. But you just heard Erin's story and I think you'll agree this song actually works much better afterwards. So in conclusion, all hail the spirits of the hills for guiding us to the true path. And I hope you enjoy this beautiful song by the Gotham City Pickers.

Get Behind Me Satan

Get behind me, Satan
Let me travel on my journey
I'm bound for heaven's mansions
To God's city in the sky
God is calling yonder
I must hasten on my journey
So get behind me, Satan
While the shadows hover nigh

You were thrown from God's own kingdom
Many years ago
You have cause grief and suffering
Many banes and woes
You have tried to lead God's children
From the promised land
So get behind me, Satan
I am bound for heaven's strand

I am looking forward
To a meeting up in heaven
Where loved ones gather round the throne
To hear the angels sing
I will see my savior
And my friends gone on up yonder
So get behind me, Satan
Only sorrow you can bring

You were thrown from God's own kingdom
Many years ago
You have cause grief and suffering
Many banes and woes
You have tried to lead God's children
From the promised land
So get behind me, Satan
I am bound for heaven's strand

You were thrown from God's own kingdom

Many years ago
You have cause grief and suffering
Many banes and woes
You have tried to lead God's children
From the promised land
So get behind me, Satan
I am bound for heaven's strand

SAM: Family Ghosts is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman. If you enjoyed Erin Barker's story, make sure you subscribe to the Story Collider podcast and find more of Erin's stories on The Moth website as well.

Dr Njoki McElroy is the author of, among other things, a book called 1012 Natchez, a memoir of grace, hardship and love. We'll post a link in the show notes for this episode.

The Gotham City Pickers are Marc Orleans on mandolin, J.P. Gilbert on guitar and Tamara Gilbert on vocals. A friendly reminder that our Patreon subscribers who we call our Kindred Spirits, get even more bonus episodes as well as ad free versions of our stories and much, much more. Join them at patreon.com/familyghosts for just \$5 a month and get the added benefit of knowing you're helping keep this project going. We appreciate your support so much. We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media and find more great podcasts at spokemedia.io. We'll be back with another bonus episode next week. Until then. Thank you for listening to Family Ghosts where every house is haunted.

You're listening to WALT homemade radio.