

SAM: Friends, we did it. I still cannot believe that it finally happened. Or we got a second season of Family Ghosts into your ears through the grace of Spoke Media, and our incredible production team, and all of you for believing that the show would be back - despite what some might argue was an abundance of evidence to the contrary. But we did not give up. You did not give up. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. I am so proud of the stories we had the opportunity to tell this season. I hope that you enjoyed them and that if you did, you will continue to share them with those in your life who you believe would appreciate them.

SAM: And here is some more good news. This summer of bonus episodes is not gonna be a repeat of last summer. By which I mean a series of tantalizing teasers about an imminent season of stories that you then learn may never arrive. We're not gonna play that trick this time. I think we, uh, we've already danced to that dance one too many times. Instead what I'm here to tell you is that season three of family goes is definitely coming to your headphones this holiday season. I can't give you the exact date yet, but it's going to be right around the holidays and we are already working on it. As I sit here speaking these words, I in fact should probably finish this intro and go back to my desk and get back to work. BUT before I do that I've just a little bit of housekeeping to attend to. I promise it will not take long. And then I have a really, really exciting new podcast to introduce you to that is produced and hosted and written by one of the producers on our family goes team, Janielle Kastner. It's called Untitled Dad Project, and it is an incredible piece of work. And I had the opportunity to talk to Janielle about that work and we're gonna play you a sample of the show on this very bonus episode. But first, but first - the aforementioned housekeeping must take place. So here we go!

SAM: First - we have two live shows coming up - next week. One of them is right here in Brooklyn, New York, at The Bell House on Wednesday, July 17th. The next one is at Union Stage in Washington, D.C. on the very next night, July 18th. Tickets for both shows are available now, they are \$15, and for that \$15 you are going to get a very special evening of live music and storytelling, featuring performers from this very show and from The Moth and from This American Life,

telling live stories on stage inspired by the themes of the work we do here on the program.

SAM: There is also a 62% chance that I am going to play the cigar box banjo at at least one of these shows. SO - if that doesn't get you excited to buy a ticket, I don't know what to tell you? I should probably think of other things to tell you. Anyway. Uh, if you're interested in joining us for one of those shows, please go to our website, family ghosts podcast dot com. When you get there, there's a little button you click that says Enter Site. Once you click that button, look for the link at the top that says "Family Ghosts Live". It will take you to the portal to buy tickets for those shows. I very much hope to see you there and if you do come please say hello afterwards. Okay, next thing is actually a reminder about the Kindred Spirits program, our community of supporters on Patreon who, in addition to bonus episodes like this one, are going to hear an entire season of additional bonus episodes that won't be available anywhere else.

SAM: So far, those episodes include an extended conversation with Understanding Israel. Understanding was one of the most fascinating former Love family members that we met on our reporting trip last summer and Kindred Spirits are also going to hear an interview with Jeffrey Mills Gardner, the co-creator of a beautiful podcast called Unwell, which tells the story of a boarding house in Ohio that is positively riddled with ghosts and owned by a family with plenty of ghosts of its own. I have been listening to that show nonstop. It is so well done and so well told and I think you all would really, really enjoy it. It is a fictional show that addresses a lot of the themes of legacy and lore that we love to talk about around these parts. Anyway, I had the opportunity to speak with Jeffrey about their team's work on the show and it was a great conversation that will be in the headphones of the Kindred Spirits imminently.

SAM: Now, of course, that is not all you get as a Kindred Spirit. You also get ad-free versions of all of our past and future shows, early access to season three and a whole lot more. That's all for just \$5 a month, and that \$5 helps guarantee that we will be able to continue doing the kind of genre, expanding ambitious storytelling that you have hopefully come to expect from us here at family ghosts.

If you are able to contribute and I fully realize it's not an option for all of you, but if you can please visit patreon.com/familyghosts we appreciate and rely on your support so much to make our show.

SAM: Alright, housekeeping complete, broom down. Let's get to the business at hand, which I am very excited about. Today's bonus episode. I am going to introduce you on this week's bonus episode to one of our shows producers, Janielle Kastner, who has just launched a podcast of her own called Untitled Dad Project. It is, in a way, a family ghost story, but told over an entire season of episodes. And in just a moment what we're going to do is play you the first episode, which Janielle calls the Prologue. Untitled Dad Project is a work of great bravery and ambition. And after you hear this prologue, I'm gonna play you some excerpts from a conversation I got to have recently with Janielle and her director slash fellow producer, Carson. And their personal and professional relationship really informs the storytelling in the show, as you are about to hear. But before we get into it, I just wanted to take a moment to tell you about some of the contributions that Janielle made to this season of Family Ghosts. She is an accomplished playwright in addition to her podcast work. And so because of that, I relied on her a lot for notes on story and structure in our episodes this season.

SAM: Just to give you a couple examples, a lot of you have written to us about how moved you were by the story of Jael. Jael was the midwife in the Love Family trilogy - the one who kept the secret birth record that you heard about in episode two and who had spent a lot of time with Posey's mom, Judy and had a lot of insights into her personality. So Jael was a character in the story that resonated with a lot of you in the Ghost Family, and you have Janielle to thank for Jael's prominence in the narrative. Janielle really honed in on Jael as a key character in the early drafts of those episodes and encouraged me to build her into the story in a much more impactful way.

SAM: Also, in the case of Bone Hill, which as you probably know by now is a musical episode, Janielle actually played the role of a, somewhat of a skeptic of musicals in general. She said, look, musicals are not my cup of tea, so I want to

make sure that folks in the audience who share that point of view are still able to access the story and understand what's happening if the format of it might be a little bit of an obstacle for them at first. And I took her feedback really, really seriously on that score and many, many others as well. Those are just a couple of examples of Janielle's ear for empathy, tone and story, all of which are on abundant display throughout Untitled Dad Project, which I can't wait to share with you right after this short break.

JANIELLE: I want to tell you a story. It's the story of my "Dad Character." The problem is: I can't. Because I don't know it. I don't know my Dad, and I've never known the story of why he wasn't in my life. A few years ago, I got his email address and started drafting him a message, drafting and redrafting. Before I could send him anything, he died. He was declared dead on my birthday. And I found out none of his friends knew I existed. (So. Then. This story's a bit on-the-nose with its details.) A pit of grief opened up inside me. Perhaps you know the kind of pit that I'm talking about. A feeling of loss I couldn't put words to, about a man whose absence I couldn't explain, and a reconciliation that was still a series of sentences I'd been typing and deleting in my mind.

JANIELLE: From inside this pit I made a decision: I want words. I want to finally know my own story. I've always been braver as a writer than I have as a person, maybe if I can't make emotional sense out of this, I can at least make *narrative* sense out of it. I decided to extend myself the same dignity I would to any protagonist. I decided to find a meaningful resolution. (...even if I have to write it myself).

JANIELLE: So before I knew what I was doing, that's what I was doing. Shortly after my father died, I started interviewing experts in my life who could help me understand myself as a character, and interviewing experts in my Dad's life who could help me understand him as a character, and experts who just know how to craft really good stories. Pretty early on, my good friend and favorite director, Carson McCain, joined me in these interviews.

CARSON: Hey, that's me, I'm Carson.

JANIELLE: And now, together in a booth, we're taking years worth of interviewing, grieving, and creating, putting it all together, examining it, activating it, and figuring out my story. Four years of the grieving process smushed into eight or so chapters, each with a different narrative theme. By the end of this, I'll have reckoned with my Dad Character, found that meaningful narrative resolution, and I'll finally (*finally*) know my own story. That's what you're about to hear. Now this is the Prologue, where we get you ready for all of that.

CARSON: Exactly, so what all do people need to know to get ready for Chapter 1?

JANIELLE: Y'all need to know how time works, in grieving and in creating, time is just a... snake eating it's own tail. Each episode is organized by theme, not by chronology. You'll hear us interviewing people from four years ago, and then us immediately debriefing then, and then you'll hear us in the booth now commenting on it.

CARSON: And because we've been working on this for four years, we pretty incorrectly often say how long ago this interview has been, so just forgive us for all the times we say two years ago when we mean four years ago. We get it. We know.

JANIELLE: Abandon all chronology ye who enters here.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: The other thing you need to know in this prologue is who you'll hear from. So you're gonna get to hear from people who know me very well.

CAROL: I love you, and I'm very proud of you, and I thank God that he chose me to be your mom.

JANIELLE: And you'll hear from people who knew my Dad Character.

CHARLEY: Yeah, I, I see a lot of him in you. Which is a good thing.

JANIELLE: You'll also hear from people who are helping me understand narrative, and what makes a good story and a great resolution.

ROBERT: The key is that you ask the right questions, and that you don't settle for easy answers.

JEANNE: Maybe this is the way you get to know your dad now.

TAYLOR ANNE: Say whatever you want to say"

ROBERT: And none of it is melodrama, it's just human.

JANIELLE: And you'll also hear from people who just stumble their way into the story.

YODER: Yeah, sure, I guess I-- That's fair to say. I'm an expert in burying your father.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Next thing you need to know, your hosts are us. So I'm Janielle, I grew up "Jan-yell," nicknamed "Jan," so all of this much illegitimacy makes. What's my real name?

CARSON: You'll hear every kind of version of Janielle's name. Uh, in addition to that, my name is Carson, but my nickname is "Cat," "Carson-Cat," "Kitty-Cat"--

JANIELLE: "Kitty Cat" for special occasions.

CARSON: Yes

JANIELLE: Get excited

CARSON: It's all me!

JANIELLE: All of this is us.

JANIELLE: In each of these chapters we pick a narrative theme to look at, and my job is to figure out what does my character need to learn from that theme, whether it's "Plot," or "Genre," or "Script"... And Carson's job is to keep us honest and on track, and you also make sure that we activate each of these themes.

CARSON: Yes, everything that you learn that you want to take from these themes, we have to find some way to integrate it into your story, so we call that activation.

CARSON: Ooo, I wrote this down, here's something we could do.

JANIELLE: I think we should activate it by a bunch of men being nice to me.

YODER: So I don't read the stage directions?

JANIELLE: I'll read stage directions.

JEANNE: Why not have an interview with a cat?

JANIELLE: This thing, the grieving process, it's a lot like the creative process. The highs are high...

JANIELLE: Sean! Hi! Aw, that's so sweet!

JANIELLE: I did it!

JANIELLE: The lows are low...

JANIELLE: "I'm going to blow my snotty nose into this luxurious Target bath towel.

CARSON: This is a really hard story.

JANIELLE: Why did we never talk about this?

JANIELLE: And, in both the grieving process and the creative process, the breakthroughs aren't what you expect them to be...

JANIELLE: I don't know, does it matter?

CARSON: Does it matter to you?

JANIELLE: Oh. That's a better question, isn't it?

CARSON: That was much more affecting to me than to you!

JANIELLE: I don't know what to do now.

CARSON: I don't, either.

JANIELLE: Oh, you know what I'm doing? I'm grieving!

JANIELLE: Now as for this story we're trying to figure out, here's what we know so far at the beginning of this thing, and what you need to know.

CARSON: First thing our story needs: a protagonist. And we've got one.

JANIELLE: Protagonist is me. We call me "Jan Character" most of the time, because, I'll be honest, I wanted to disassociate.

CARSON: Next, we need to know the backstory, so everyone has the same working details that we do to start off with Chapter 1.

JANIELLE: So, these are the facts of our Jan Character's life abridged.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Our Jan Character is born to a Mom Character who loves her a lot. And a Dad Character who's not in the picture, and she doesn't know how or when he wrote himself out of the picture.

CARSON: When she's a kid, she has these, sort of, snippets of memories of when her dad would show up. So when she's a toddler, he comes to her house and refuses to read a book to her.

JANIELLE: Yes, it was *Strawberry Shortcake*. Later, he comes to a school play of her's, it was *Peter Rabbit*.

CARSON: When she's in junior high, there's a Father's Day lunch, and it's kinda awkward.

JANIELLE: And she gives him a book of Farside comics. And then in high school, she gets a birthday card from him, it's signed "Dad/Rick," and that's the last time she hears from him. Another important fact, her Dad Character doesn't pay child support for most of her life, and her Mom Character takes him to court periodically, and more often than not, he doesn't show up.

CARSON: And when she's a pre-teen and a teenager, her friends sort of start to ask her, you know, "What's the deal with your Dad Character?" and she just sort of shrugs it off and doesn't really say anything.

JANIELLE: And in that, the people in her life assume she doesn't wanna talk about her Dad Character, but the truth is, she doesn't know *how* to talk about her Dad Character, even if she tried.

CARSON: Next, you graduate from theatre school and start a career as a writer--

JANIELLE: Not *me*, I don't know who this "me" is you're talking about.

CARSON: Goddammit!

JANIELLE: It's a "Jan Character."

CARSON: UGH.

JANIELLE: But yes, Jan Character does go to theatre school, where she meets a Carson Character. And she decides she wants a career as a writer and as a performer, and this is probably dumb, but she doesn't care, because she really loves stories.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: When she's 24, her Dad Character finally shows up in court, and her mom sees him there, gets his email address, and passes it off to Jan Character. Mom Character says, "You should email him." She has a premonition that Dad Character doesn't have much time left, but Mom Character often has premonitions, so Jan kind of blows this off. But still.

CARSON: Then, when she's still 24, Jan Character decides she's gonna reach out to him.

JANIELLE: Yeah, she starts drafting that email in her mind to him, again and again, drafting and redrafting. Next important fact, she turns 25 and gets an email. The subject line says, "(Her Dad Character's name), Deceased." She learns that

he's dead. That's a fact. She learns that none of his friends knew she existed. That's a fact. She shows up to his memorial services as his surprise, bastard daughter. That's a fun fact. She doesn't know who she is anymore. A pit opens up and threatens to swallow her whole. Fact, fact, fact.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: So not a great story. But we're working on it.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: We'll make it a good one. Now you know all the details I'm working with at the beginning of this story. Everything I know, you know. This isn't S-Town, you already know the big plot twist: my dad died. This isn't Serial, you've got all the important details at the top, like, my version of the Best Buy phone booth is that Strawberry Shortcake book, cell phone tower is the Peter Rabbit play... And my Dad Character's death doesn't have a cool true crime angle, no mystery, we're not going to find out he's Richard Simmons. This is just a sad thing that happened. There are lots of sad things that happen. There are lots of people with bad dads. There are lots of deaths every minute. But I think each of those sadnesses, each of those bad dads, each of those deaths, are worthy. We just have to figure out what makes them a good story. So my dad's death is just a thing that happened. But it happened to me. And now we're going to make it a story, so maybe I can find some kind of meaning.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Years ago, I heard Roger Ebert say, “A film is not about its subject. It's about *how* its about its subject.” And I’ve thought about that ever since. The details that we’re starting with, that’s just what happened. Not sending an email, regretting it, a pit of grief opening up, not knowing who you are anymore, that’s just what happened. But a story isn’t *what* happens, it’s *how* it happens. I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you MY story. But first: we have to figure out how it happens. Welcome, to my Untitled Dad Project.

ROBERT: What is the inciting incident? You have a lot of choices.

JANIELLE: I asked my mom when I was young, I said, “What do I tell my friends when they ask why I only have a mommy, and not a mommy and a daddy?” And she said, “Just tell them it’s not your story to tell.”

ROBERT: Ah, see that’s, see, now it’s becoming interesting.

JANIELLE: How did it feel that that dad never came?

CAROL: How did it feel?

ROBERT: You don’t know you know anything until you can write it down.

[MUSIC]

SAM: That was the prologue for untitled dead project. Janielle Kastner's fascinating exploration of grief, storytelling and creativity. We'll be back after a quick break for a conversation with Janielle and Carson about how the project came to be. Stay tuned.

SAM: Can you guys talk a little bit about your relationship that predates working together on the podcast? Like how you, how you got to know each other and became collaborators?

CARSON: Yeah, absolutely. So...

JANIELLE: It's my favorite thing to talk about. So Carson was not my theater child, but she was my adopted theater niece because we met in theater school. The subtext of that, theater school. And you get like a big and a little?

CARSON: Yeah. So, so basically like, you know, in sororities you get, uh, you are a big and you get a little and you sort of mentor them. Our version of that with theater was a, you have a theater family, and so mothers get daughters and fathers get sons.

JANIELLE: And Carson wasn't mine, but I kind of claimed her adjacently, so she was my niece. Basically, you just like guide them through and just like love them and like make them feel like a person. Um, which is very funny. And then we became real friends.

CARSON: The time I, I think I thought we were like, we were real friends is when you went through a breakup and you came to me and cried and I-

JANIELLE: I cried on the carpet of your dorm room floor while you were trying to Skype someone else.

CARSON: Yeah. Um, and um, but I remember feeling like, oh, we're good enough friends that I'm not just taking from this person. Like she's, you know, she, she can, she wants something from me too. Like this is real friendship, is like a give and a take.

JANIELLE: Yeah.

SAM: Yeah, yeah.

JANIELLE: The moment I knew that you were my true in real friend. Um, I, I think maybe it takes me longer to realize these things, um, was when we were working on this process. When we get to a point, uh, of the project in a later episode where I try to do an exercise of lamenting because someone gave me that advice and it doesn't work. And I asked Carson if she wants to lament kind of as a joke and she takes it very seriously and just cries out to some higher being. Why did you let something bad happen to my friend? And, um, it was like the tears I wasn't crying, she was crying. Um, and that was a moment where I realized, Oh, someone can sit with me and my grief and can bear witness to it. And, um, and I think the true sign of true friendship is um like, why do, why would anyone let anything bad happen to this person? I wish I could protect them from it. Um, it just was a moment of true love and perfect protection. But this project, this process, this process has certainly, um, brought us a million times closer.

CARSON: Yeah, for sure.

SAM: So the development of the friendship, particularly in your case, Janielle, it sounds like, permeated the creative process.

JANIELLE: Yes, absolutely. Um, it's, it is a wild and scary thing to let people in on your mildest imperfections. The fact that you were late sending emails, the fact that you are, have a messy car and all of those intimacy makes right. And then you just escalate that up to letting somebody in on your messy creative process and seeing how bad it is and asking them to help you make it better. Um, that is so much intimacy and then opening them up and saying, um, would you mind sitting with me quietly in the pit of grief? Um, is one of the truest, most, uh, truest forms of intimacy I've ever experienced in a friendship. And it's been with Carson.

SAM: Yeah. So Janielle, what was the moment for you that you knew that you wanted to not only make a piece of art out of this experience around your father's death, but to make a podcast specifically?

JANIELLE: I had the experience of, um, never having known the story about my dad, wasn't in my life, but all of a sudden people needing a story for why my dad, all of a sudden needing that. Cause you know, you say, oh, my dad died. I found out, I got an email while I was at work. I was working late. That's where I found out that he died. Um, and I walked into my boss's office and said, um, my dad died. And he goes, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry." And I was like, well, I didn't know him dot, dot, dot. How do you, what do I say next? You have no, I have no con- I have no story. I have no lines. I have no POV. I, I can't hand anything to anybody cause I don't have it for myself. I just knew I had to make some sense out of this and I couldn't make any emotional sense out of it. So I thought, well, just make narrative, right? I'll make narrative sense of it. I knew it was going to be a podcast because I knew I wanted to have conversations. I wanted to learn how to talk about my dad. I wanted an excuse to ask people about him.

SAM: Yeah.

JANIELLE: And knew, and podcasts to me are so much more intimate than any other medium. I can be talking to you in your ear while you're commuting on the train. No one else knows that I'm talking to you, but you and I.

SAM: I'm so interested to hear you say that you, you felt like you knew it needed to be a podcast because you wanted to have conversations. And that I think is one of the things that I found most surprising in listening is I, and it was a pleasant discovery, but I did not expect the show to be so conversationally driven. And one of the things that's really remarkable about, about that is I feel, I don't know if I could have named it until you just gave that answer, but I feel like I'm listening to you figure out how to talk about your dad and your situation overall, kind of in real time. I mean, I, I'm ambiently aware of the fact that the show is edited and I'm not hearing everything, but you leave in so much of your fumbling for words and again, not, not in an awkward way. I don't mean any of this in an awkward way. I mean in the sense that it does feel like you are, you're making us privy to this experience that you've never had before. That is so much about how to be in a

conversation that most people don't have to think very carefully about, which is talking about your family and the circumstances of your family. Um, Carson, I'm interested to know for you what it was like to, having directed plays, um, what, what was it like to be a director for this, this series of conversations and scenarios?

CARSON: Oh, it's a fascinating challenge. Um, I liked to go in, uh, to any interview we did knowing that I'm sitting there as a silent ally to Janielle. Um, it's not my job to jump in. However, I do think it is my job to hold tightly to the things I think are important to Janielle's story. Um, and, and to offer them back to her later.

SAM: Right.

CARSON: Um, so I, so I've, I've found that when I direct actors, oftentimes I see like, oh, this is where we're going, but this is where we are and I'm going to hold tight to where we're going as we take the steps towards that. Um, and so a lot of my directing conversations has been, okay, I'm going to sit here silently in this conversation, in this interview, I'm going to hold on to where I think we might be going. Um, and then Janielle and I get in the booth and we start talking about those interviews and we play them back and Janielle has ideas. Um, but that's where I give myself space to interrupt and say, hey, here's a thing.

SAM: Yup. Yup. I can finally tell you this thing that I was feeling in that moment.

CARSON: Yes! Or this thing that I was feeling, did you feel the same way? Or, or this was an incredible moment. Did you notice it? And sometimes the answer is like, yes! And sometimes it's, I don't know what you're talking about.

JANIELLE: Like what I just did, which is tell me more about where you're going because I have no idea where it's going to be and I bet it'll help.

CARSON: Yeah. So we did an interview with, um, uh, Alia, our executive producer's good friend who, um, was...

JANIELLE: Oh my god, I forgot about that interview.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: That was so long ago.

CARSON: It was so long ago. It was um, with this woman who was a chaplain in a hospital. Um, and she, her job was to sit with people while people like, while a doctor told them like your loved one has died. And like she sits with people in grief. And so I, I don't even remember what this interview was about, but that was a moment that I thought to myself, this podcast is so much bigger than Janielle's specific story of grief. And I remember, I remember thinking like this podcast means something to anyone who has ever experienced grief because by... We're letting people in on that super vulnerable space. And so, so I feel like I, I sat on this idea of I might know what I, or I might have an idea about what I think the point of this podcast is.

JANIELLE: While I didn't.

CARSON: Yeah. Which is like Janille's - and I think the worthy goal, and Janielle's goal is like find a narrative resolution.

JANIELLE: A meaningful narrative resolution.

CARSON: Yeah, and we're going to keep seeking that and that's what we're chasing after, but like all of a sudden I started noticing after that interview, like the byproduct of the podcast, which is beautiful human connection, and I but like Janielle and I did not talk about that. That interview was two years ago and we didn't talk about it until we just had like a pre-brief for an episode and I was like, I'm going to tell you like a thing that I've been thinking for a really long time.

JANIELLE: I think a thing that you've taught me, you've created a space for me to have my grief as problematic as it is, as regressive as it is, as, as, as frustrating as it is when you think you've climbed over a hurdle only to find yourself looped back around and you're in front of the same hurdle again. You've created a space for me to um, feel my feelings and assumed my feelings are worthy and we'll figure out how along the way. Um, and, and that's given me the power to take all of my problematic, confusing, frustrating feelings seriously, and let them be felt.

SAM: I have to say. I also hear you, not to presume or name your experience, but I also hear you being kind of gobsmacked by the idea that you're allowed to have an experience and, rather than a story, you know what I mean? Um, like you're-

CARSON: Oh, ho, ho. Oh, Sam, I loved that. That was great.

JANIELLE: Carson's going to store that away and make sure that uh, she eventually convinces me, it was my idea.

SAM: After the break, I'll look ahead at what's to come on Untitled Dad Project, including Janielle's fraught exchange with a Hollywood screenwriting legend. Stay tuned.

SAM: Welcome back to the show. In episode One A of Untitled Dad Project, which just came out this week. Janielle has an intense and wide ranging discussion with legendary screenwriting instructor, Robert McKee, who drills Janielle in what he says is necessary to turn her experience into a compelling story. It's a very harrowing listening experience. Robert, who didn't know Janielle at all before they got on the phone together, does things like accuse Janielle's mom of being a liar and a member of a religious cult. I found the episode fascinating both as someone following Janielle's story and as a fellow audio storyteller,

SAM: I think that the reason that I was interested in the choice to, to have him as your expert, I'm realizing comes from knowing you outside of the project and knowing that you, you are a playwright. You are somebody who has written a lot of stories, um, and knows a lot about character development and give incredible notes on story and character development in Family Ghosts episodes. And your willingness to kind of put that aside in this conversation and, to my ear at least, present yourself to this person almost as though you had never thought about these issues before, opened up this really, really dynamic space where as a listener, I'm worried about you at various points. And then I hear you tell me that even though he's being harsh in a lot of moments, the points that he's making are resonating with you. And then it brings me out of a space of worrying about you and, you know, feeling like this stranger who has this culturally endowed authority is naming your emotional life in all these intense ways. Um, and then all of a sudden it's like you've brought, by telling me that you appreciate some of the things he's saying, you've brought me in even closer to the story by saying that you are aware that he's being indelicate, but that you are strong enough to handle what he's throwing at you. Um, and I'm curious to know, is that what it was like inside of the conversation? Cause that's what it felt like as a listener. But I'm, I'm curious to know if that, that's what it felt like to you as someone who is already an artist to be having this conversation with him.

JANIELLE: Yeah. Okay. So two things there. Don't let me forget both of them. The first one is the, the writer and producer and person who gives you notes on your story and has such, um, opinions about, um, how to make them clearer. That person is someone who has been working on UDP for four years. So a lot of the clarity that I've had to apply to my own story, and, um, you want to talk about killing your darlings, like you're working on your own life, being precious about your own, own grief and then having to cut it all or realize that the story isn't what you thought it was after all on such a large macro way, and also it's a deeply personal way - then it's made me, um, I think a lot less precious and a lot more honest about my storytelling. So I think you're, you're, you're, you're, you're reaping the benefits of this four year UDP process. And, um, my Family Ghosts notes. The person who sat down in the booth of Robert McKee did not know what

her story was about. She knew she was sad. She knew, she didn't know why she was sad. And she knew that she was going to make something out of this. That's all that she knew when she got in that booth.

SAM: Gotcha.

JANIELLE: So the things that he is, he's placing before me genuinely had not occurred to me. Um, uh, there was so much about my mom and my's relationship that I, I didn't really know about yet. There was so much I didn't know. And listening back to that interview was so painful. It was a level of Dante's Inferno of purgatory to have to listen back to this interview, you know, years later and edit it and trim it down and- Oh my God, I wouldn't wish it on anybody. Um, cause I was so blind to my own life and my own experience. And granted he's not like correct about my life, my experience, but he is um, drawing out like a, like a sieve. Like he's just drawing out themes that are latent underneath that I have then taken and um, applied authentically to my story. So I was genuinely that um, blindsided.

JANIELLE: The second thing, the Robert McKee episode, this first episode, this is like literally V12. Um, dramatically different V12 because- and every time we played it for people, people came away with different experiences. They thought, Oh my God, Jan is an idiot and Robert McKee is brilliant.

CARSON: That was the first, first pass. The first pass, we played for a group of people and it came out, we played episodes One A and One B and it came out Robert was great.

JANIELLE: Thank God she found him to help the whole time. She's such a dummy.

CARSON: Yeah. He's the wise old mentor. She's such a dummy. And also like they were really against your mom.

JANIELLE: Yes. People thought my mom was just going to be, because Robert is so um, um, deeply suspicious of her and everything that she knows to be true about her own experience. Um, so then the V- V2 we rewrite it and I'm like, you guys, it's fine. I had a whole section where I was like, you know, I invited him to this interview. Right? Like he responded to my email like he's here cause I asked him to be here. Like, it's from a position of strength that you have to be vulnerable, investigate your own story. Like, and then people were like, oh, that doesn't, the people got the wrong end there. And then there was another version where it was like, oh my God, Jan is being bullied. Some of the same people mind you from that first listen,

SAM: Right. Oh that's interesting.

JANIELLE: to that next listen flipped from- Yeah. Flipped from, "oh my God, thank God Robert's there" to "oh my God, Jan's being bullied. I can't stand that guy". And none of those were the point. So to your point about clarity, it was just trying to get all the blinders out of people, out of the way, shutting all the doors that are detours to get down to, no, no, no. We just want to know where do we start from, and we start from a place of your life isn't what you thought it was. And we know that because losing somebody you didn't know has all of a sudden opened up a completely different feeling inside your body. Like all that is information. Let's investigate it. Um, and, and also, um, so many people we talked to you have some sort of like therapeutic lens. We talked to a lot of different counselors in the course of this, talked to a lot of different artists who are um, so kind and empathetic and... He wasn't treating me like a person. He was treating me like a writer. That's what it's like.

CARSON: What I like about where we landed with episode One A is I get to function in a lot of ways as that protest voice that the audience might have.

JANIELLE: Which you genuinely felt.

CARSON: Oh, which I genuinely felt. I was very upset at the way he spoke to you about several things in your life and I still get upset about it. Like this is all a very authentic reaction of I don't like it. Um, but also the reason I think it is so useful to start episode One A with Robert is we are showing the audience that we're not going to be precious with your story. Like it is so clear right off the bat. Like, we're in this for real and we're going to do the hard stuff and it's not always going to be very fun.

JANIELLE: And you'll be able to see when I like, I would really love to cut that part where I keep talking and there's a delay and I can't tell that Robert's interrupting me and it makes everyone cringe so badly.

CARSON: Oh my god. It's the worst.

JANIELLE: I would love to cut that part, but it's so authentic to the experience. So again, you know, we were saying we're digging until we figure out what's actually happening, that's actually happening in this part of the story. It's um, Jan just keeps talking and just kind of afraid to let people tell her what's true until they kind of brutally interrupt and tell her what they see.

SAM: Yeah.

CARSON: And all of that is in service of the audience knowing that we mean it when we say it's going to be okay. And if we, you know, if we wrapped this in a bow with a nice sound cue and make you feel good, we've done it wrong. Like, all of this Robert interview is in service of proving that point. We're not gonna do that. And I don't think we have. And I think we've stood true to that and I think that-

SAM: Oh, I agree.

JANIELLE: That probably be lovely if we like got your feet wet with like a nicer, easier, um, lovelier interview where the guests and I just completely hit it off.

CARSON: I don't know.

JANIELLE: And still tweet each other,

SAM: Oh no, I disagree.

JANIELLE: tweet each other. To this day. You do?

CARSON: I trust you so much more, Jan, because you're willing to show me this part.

SAM: Yes. Yes. 100%. It's a, it's a snap-to conversation. It's so not at all what I am expecting it to be as it begins. And it's, it just so quickly becomes the kind of conversation where you feel like I have to hang on every word of this because it's going in a direction I did not see coming. Um, and I agree very much with Carson that I think it, it endows you with a tremendous amount of respect and a lot of intrigue. Um, because just to stay with this for a moment, one of the things that's happening that I cannot imagine how, what I would have done in a similar moment is that he is being very, very, very judgmental about your parents. Um, and I know that, um, that like there's, and as you say, he's treating them as characters, not as people, but you're making a story out of real people that you're related to. And I don't know if I would have been able to, to roll with that in, in the way that you do in this. And I'm, I guess I'm just curious to know again, like what it was like inside of those moments or, or is that even what it felt like for you? Did, did, were you in a space of experiencing them more as characters in that moment?

JANIELLE: I like characters who are, um, surprising and do kind of awful things for reasons that we come to understand. I like complicated characters so as he started treating people I know, like my mom for instance, who I'm immensely protective of, like a character and sort of like PDF-ing them. You know, and turning them down to one color, starting from a trope if you will. Um, and then kind of, uh, what he did is he just sort of presented a whole different point of view on, on what I thought was already like a flat part of the story. I thought I kind of

knew my mom down pat. And he just completely complicated that by presenting a whole other version of her that was down pat, and all of that gave me the freedom to treat her like a much more complicated, nuanced person.

SAM: Yeah. So I just have one more question I want to ask. And, and it's a question for both of you. You guys are both, as we have discussed, theater artists, you both work in radio and podcasting. You are both very experienced in the fourth dimensional process of taking disparate pieces and trying to organize them into some kind of deliverable, artistic experience for people to digest. But this piece, it cuts just so close to the bone and it is so brave and it is so sprawling, and it is so, it goes so deep into these caverns of grief, and, and all these other very, very tricky emotions. And I'm curious to know, is this the hardest thing you've ever done?

JANIELLE: Hm.

CARSON: It's hard for me to say that this is the hardest thing I've ever done because it doesn't always feel like it's my pain to hold. Um, but a lot of my work as a human has been learning that it is okay for the people who are closest to me to be uncomfortable. Um...

JANIELLE: It's hard for you.

CARSON: It's very hard for me. Um, and it is okay for me to allow them to have pain because it's in service of them finding their story. So I would say, um, as maybe an artist or as a like worker, no, this isn't the hardest thing I've ever done. I have great collaborators. People helped me in ways that I've never had before and that's incredible. I can delegate things. Oh my God, it's so great. I have support. Um, but as a human and as a friend, um, it's been very hard to sit in this pain. And it may have been the hardest thing I've ever done to allow my friend to have this much pain, um, and just, just be here for it. Oh, I was gonna say, um, the word that comes to mind to me is joy because joy like, oh god, we're going to go inside out. Right? Like joy doesn't exist without sadness. Like deep sadness, uh, has to be felt

for deep joy to also be there. So there's this interesting like melancholy tone over this whole thing that my deepest joy is my friendship with Janielle. And that comes out of like a very deep sadness and pain that she's had to go through. And so the hardest thing I've ever done is worth it.

JANIELLE: Yeah. Yeah. Maybe it's the hardest thing, but it's had the highest payoff.

CARSON: Yeah. Yeah.

JANIELLE: I know, I know what I'm capable of now. And I know that I exist and I'm legitimate and that, um, pain can be felt without, um, destroying things. Actually, it might be where some of the life can come from.

CARSON: Yeah.

[MUSIC]

CARSON: It's also very funny.

JANIELLE: Yeah. Please tell the people that they're not just going to cry, they'll also laugh with us, cause grief turns out is hilarious.

SAM: Yes. Yes. I, I, I can confirm what Janielle and Carson are telling you right now. There are some very funny moments in this.

JANIELLE: Tell the people.

SAM: But I often find myself laughing the hardest when I have also been, been made to, to feel the most deeply unfunny things. And when, when those two things can exist in harmony with each other, that's uh, that's, uh, what we say in the creative business, the good stuff.

JANIELLE: The technical term. Thank you so much for talking to us, Sam.

CARSON: Yes, thank you Sam.

SAM: Thank you guys.

SAM: That'll do it for our first bonus episode of the summer, Ghost Family. Thank you for listening. We will be off next week, but back on July 24th with another bonus episode. If you haven't already, please leave us a review in Apple podcasts or wherever you're listening to this. And if you have the means, I hope you'll consider joining the Kindred Spirits on Patreon at patreon.com/familyghosts. Don't forget to subscribe to Untitled Dad Project. Thanks to Janielle and Carson for chatting with me this week. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett, and Family Ghosts is a proud creative partner of Spoke Media. Find more great podcasts at spokemedia.io. We'll see you back here in two weeks on Family Ghosts where every house is haunted.

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