

SAM: Hello, listeners old and new. Thank you so much for tuning in, as always. Before we begin, I have a request for you. If you haven't already, please visit us in the Apple Podcast directory and leave our show a review. It makes a huge difference in terms of new listeners being able to find our work, and we appreciate it so much. Also, remember to keep listening after the credits of this week's show. You'll hear a sneak preview of next week's story. And with that, let's begin.

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

[FG Theme]

SAM: The alert listeners among you will recall that last season, our team successfully investigated the disappearance of a grandfather's corpse - a journey which took us from a cacophonous Dunkin Donuts in Queens, to a quiet subdivision in Tampa, to - in a development that was very exciting for me personally - an actual lanai. For the uninitiated, a lanai is an enclosed veranda with floor-to-ceiling screens - so it's like your inside and outside at the same time. Lanais are ideal for drinking tequila sunrises on, which, naturally, was a key part of our investigative process.

Surprisingly, given the generally hapless nature of our approach as detectives in that episode, this season our mailbox was inundated with requests to solve similar riddles - an uncle's missing leg which was embalmed and sold at a yard sale, a grandfather whose grandkids are convinced he was D.B. Cooper, and a hotel wall rumored to be filled with skeletons.

[music fades]

Those requests were intriguing, to be sure. But most captivating of all was a message from one Michael Falco.

MICHAEL: Hi, Family Ghosts...

Subject line, “The Chinese Food Incident.”

MICHAEL: It has haunted our family for 25 years.

The story’s pretty simple. My mom and dad went out to eat Chinese food. The leftovers sat in the fridge overnight and when my mother went to eat them for lunch the next day, the contents were missing.

SAM: Upon discovering the missing leftovers, Michael goes on to explain, his mother flew into a blind rage. She summoned her husband and all six of her children to the family room, where she embarked on a seven-hour inquisition - you heard that right, *seven hours* - at the conclusion of which no one confessed. So she drew up a ballot on a chalkboard, and ordered everyone to vote for the person they thought had committed the crime. And when the results were tallied...

MICHAEL: I was eventually named as the prime suspect and grounded. I have no idea why, except I’m a middle child with a deeply guilty heart.

Now, on the surface, the circumstances in this case were, perhaps, less dramatic than some of the other mysteries we considered.

ODELIA: But then there’s this detail in the middle of it.

Producer Odelia Rubin.

ODELIA: “It has haunted our family for 25 years.” 25 years! Who still talks about missing takeout 25 years later?! What kind of family does this?

SAM: What kind of family indeed? As Odelia and I were about to discover, the kind that relives this story every time they get together, and for which said tellings begin innocently enough...

PATTY: And then she woke up the next morning to get her leftovers and they were GONE and so she said “who ate it?”

KATIE: And the empty box was in the fridge.

PATTY: I don’t remember that part.

KATIE: Yes.

...but inevitably devolve into this.

[unintelligible shouting]

KATHY: I think we need family therapy.

[music in: FG Theme]

This week on the show, a story about a story. From Spoke Media and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this is episode 12 - "The Chinese Food Incident." Our investigation begins, after the break.

[music fades]

SAM: Welcome back to the show. This week, producer Odelia Rubin and I are trying to solve a decades-old crime - a missing plate of Chinese food leftovers, devoured twenty-five years ago in the middle of the night. The accused culprit - Michael - says it wasn't him. There is no forensic evidence, and every time the family re-hashes the incident, no one's willing to confess. This one's gonna be tough - but you don't call the *Family Ghosts* team for the easy ones.

Before we got any further, we needed to know a little bit more about Michael's family, the Falcos. From his message, we didn't know much beyond their affinity for accusations and sweet-and-sour chicken. So we asked Michael to put us in touch with an outside source who could tell us more.

O'TOOLE: Hello?

ODELIA: Hi Joe, this is Odelia and Sam.

O'TOOLE: Hi.

ODELIA: How's it goin'?

O'TOOLE: Good.

Michael suggested a guy named Joe O'Toole. Before we proceed, it's important to note that an astonishing number of the people you're gonna meet in this story are named Joe - so we're going to refer to this one as just "O'Toole."

O'TOOLE: They were great at just dealing with any issues that came along and if that meant throwing somebody under the bus and then laughing about it, as we are, you know, twenty years, twenty some odd years later, uh that's how they dealt with things. And they, they were... they were successful in doing that.

O'Toole told us he spent a lot of time with the Falcos in the mid-nineties, after he dropped out of college.

O'TOOLE: Their mom would always call down "is Joe eating dinner with us?" And of course the answer was always yes.

Dinner, O'Toole explained, was an ideal laboratory for observing the Falco family dynamic up-close. He recalled one particular example involving Julie, who's one of Michael's older sisters.

O'TOOLE: Julie was, was applying for colleges, and she was kind of debating where she was gonna go to school. I had gone to University of Kansas, she said she thinks she's going to KState. And I just kind of chimed in, "Well that, that seems like a mistake to me." Just being sarcastic given it's a rival.

Well she got very upset and stood up at the dinner table and said, "Fuck you, Joe, you don't even live in this house." And storms out of the room.

And everybody looks at each other and just starts laughing. And... And it was all fine. So it was that sort of thing that was just repressing that. Something serious could happen but it would be ok, and you would get past it.

Life with the Falcos was refreshing for O'Toole - it was different than what he was used to.

JOE: I think a lot of the way we dealt with issues in our family was just a lot of unspoken things. Um. Punishment was usually like emotional isolation. Is what I kind of learned to call it. Um. Being around the Falco family was just... They were still accepting even when things went wrong.

[MUSIC IN]

But if the Falcos are so good at confronting tense situations in the moment, and then laughing off that tension - what's different about the Chinese food incident? Because Michael certainly isn't over it. He feels guilty, and he wants answers.

Michael was born in Kansas City in the early 80's - the fourth of six siblings. In person, Michael is friendly, talkative, and analytical. He's always been curious about the story behind the story - ever since he was a little kid in church - where he'd get distracted during mass, and stare up at the ceiling.

MICHAEL: I can remember it had these like massive rafters throughout it. And I had like in my mind, there were like these little people, living in this where like, you know, they were like as close I think I came to an imaginary friend.

They had like trains, like Disney world or something, and they had lives and I was somehow like their leader or something.

Just this like totally lost in my imagination of like making up this whole world, so as not to deal with the thing in front of me.

Another thing Michael's always been is a little bit in his head. One of his relatives described him as the kind of person who would design a new state-of-the-art road — a kind that had *never* been built before — and would then get hit by a truck while trying to cross that road.

Michael told us that even though he didn't pay a lot of attention in church, his plan as a kid was to grow up and become a priest. At first, we were a little confused by that - but then he explained.

MICHAEL: If you're raised Catholic, to understand that like one route, if you're gay, is to become a priest so that you don't have to worry about sex, and such things. And so, I think in my mind, uh, there was a scenario in which I never had to be in a relationship, that I could've just kinda skipped to being a priest, and wouldn't have ever had to like come out, or anything like that.

This is where we discovered one of the keys to understanding Michael: he's always felt like he's had to hide the truth about himself. And around the time of the Chinese food incident, in the mid-90's, that feeling was particularly acute.

MICHAEL: Like, I would actually have that nightmare most nights, where like someone would find out I was gay. And then I'd wake up and I'd feel the relief and be like, "Oh thank God." That didn't happen.

That's the headspace Michael was in the night his mother came home with Chinese Food leftovers, and someone ate those leftovers, and everyone decided that it was Michael. For Michael, the two things — coming out and the Chinese food incident — have always felt linked. In his first email to us, he described his 11 year old self as having a “guilty heart.”

MICHAEL: You know it's like magical thinking, essentially. Like it was like a sense that the whole world revolved around me, that I had like the ability to fuck things up so badly, and that I was bad. And that like, you know, of course things- of course the universe always like, you know, would conspire against me or like something would happen, and like I'd have to like live with the consequences of that thing.

And so, even though Michael swears he doesn't remember eating the leftovers, it's always made sense to him that he was the one that the family found guilty that day.

MICHAEL: I mean, I always thought it was the sexuality to be honest. I always assumed it was the sense of ... the sense that like I had this secret, that I had this thing that I couldn't share, that everybody could see it, I knew they could see it. And so, I had to do everything in my power to hide it. And like from that you start feeling bad about yourself. You start thinking like, of course like I deserve this.

Odelia and I were really struck by how hard Michael is on himself - as absurd as this story seemed on its face, it's clearly a vessel for a lot of self-doubt for Michael, both then and now.

ODELIA: That's heavy to walk around with. That's heavy. That feeling.

MICHAEL: Yeah... I mean it's ... It shouldn't feel like that much of a weight, but it, it does feel like a ... I can just see the ways in which like I can disappoint people or things like that. And I think like this- this feels like one of those.

This poor guy! Odelia and I just could not believe that someone as caring and sensitive as Michael would've stolen anyone's leftovers - let alone been allowed to stand falsely accused for twenty-five years!

[MUSIC]

So how could a family that was so accepting of O'Toole, so quick to laugh off a screaming outburst, so seemingly at ease in the midst of drama - how could that be the same family that made its own son feel like a criminal outcast?

There was only one way to find out.

O'TOOLE: Okay, well, have a great trip to Kansas City, and make sure you tell them all that I said hello...

SAM: After the break, Odelia and I visit the Falcos - and O'Toole's prediction comes true.

O'TOOLE: It'll be very interesting.

SAM: Michael told us the whole family - him, his five siblings and their spouses - would all be getting together in late June at the family's house in Kansas City - which, Odelia and I discovered as we pulled into the driveway, features a lush green lawn with a four-foot tall brick sign that reads FALCO in thick block letters.

Clearly, the Falcos are a proud bunch - but also, a suspicious one. So we set up our microphones in the den, and started interrogating them. One by one.

[MUSIC]

First up in our rogue's gallery is Joe - Michael's older brother. The family calls Joe "Joe Three," which, as we've mentioned, is convenient given the wide variety of Joes lurking in the corners of this story. So we'll call him "Joe Three" also. Joe Three was 19 at the time of the Incident. He'd dropped out of college and moved into the basement, with his drum set. He and his friends had a heavy metal band.

JOE THREE: Our stage name that year was, uh, JD and the CKO, Jeffrey Dahmer and Cooked Kid Orchestra.

The name, Joe Three assured us, was just a joke - he liked getting a rise out of people. And as for what Joe Three *dis*-likes...

JOE THREE: Yeah, I don't necessarily like different foods to be touching or mixed up.

And when it comes to sharing food?

JOE THREE: Yeah...I'm not really into used food.

So which is it? Merry basement prankster who might've stolen the Chinese food to get a rise out of everyone? Or reclusive basement musician and picky eater with zero interest in someone's greasy leftovers? It was too early to tell.

Next in our lineup of suspects is Julie - a couple years older than Michael. Her siblings used to call her the Black Sheep - which isn't a bad pseudonym for a CRIMINAL. Julie told us she was moody in those days, and she used to volunteer to run errands for her mom, just so she could have some time to herself.

JULIE: I loved to smoke in my car!

Julie was 14 or 15 around the time of the Chinese Food Incident, and when she wasn't running errands for her mom, she fought with her constantly. You know - the mom whose leftovers were stolen? Odelia and I filed that piece of information under "M" - for MOTIVE. Plus - we heard from a number of sources that Julie had a good friend she was spending a lot of time with in those days. A friend by the name of Mary Jane.

ODELIA: Yeah, the other thing that Michael has mentioned was that you might have been smoking pot at the time.

JULIE: I don't think I was. I was- I think I started smoking cigarettes. I don't think I smoked pot until I was a sophomore.

I'll admit, Julie was my prime suspect going into this interrogation. A freshly-minted stoner, just home from a night of partying and overcome with the munchies? What's gonna be more appealing when she opens the fridge than a bulging container of Chinese food? But Julie claims pot smoking didn't start until later. Hmm.

Next up: Patty, Michael's oldest sister. Her siblings refer to her as "Perfect Patty" - sarcastically, of course, because Patty was anything but perfect, by her own admission. She was seventeen at the time of the crime, and she says she loved to party, and she used to come home drunk a lot. She also told us a story about a time she had a friend over when she wasn't supposed to, and Julie, the Black Sheep, tattled on her. So Patty and her friend got revenge on Julie...

PATTY: We pinned her on the ground, and we were hitting her. I think I spit in her mouth. I was like, "Why would you even say that?"

Patty was clearly willing to intimidate people into silence when they knew she'd done something wrong. Then again, she's got an alibi for the night in question - from this guy.

JOE NOVACEK: I just remember showing up, and then you're like, "I can't go out because somebody made my mom mad." I'm like, "Do I have to go home?" You're like, "Yes."

That's Joe Novacek - Patty's husband, and another of the seemingly infinite array of Joe's in this story. At the time, Novacek and Patty had just started dating, and enjoyed taking advantage of the cavernous Falco home for covert trysts. But on the night of the Chinese food incident, there would be no such neckery.

JOE NOVACEK: I just remember being there, and thinking this is weird. I have to go home because somebody ate Chinese food. Cause I remember being mad...

PATTY: Right.

JOE NOVACEK: I'm like god! I'm not gonna get to make out with my girlfriend because somebody ate the stupid Chinese food.

PATTY: Right!

Of course, Novacek is not the most credible witness - he's not going to say anything to incriminate his wife. Then again, why would Patty have lied to him that night? If she was the one who'd eaten the leftovers, wouldn't she have said, "You have to go home because *I* ate some Chinese food?"

Another dead end. Let's turn to Michael, our supposedly-reliable protagonist, who we've already met. I will just add here that we heard another story about Michael from O'Toole, who told us that pranks and dares were pretty common in the Falco family, and that Michael was always looking for ways to fit in with everyone's expectations of who he thought they wanted him to be. In one incident of Falco legend, Michael's siblings all got drunk and dared Michael to eat a pile of dollar bills - which he did. Which is disgusting. But also - kind of in character for a younger sibling who feels guilty all the time, and doesn't want anyone to notice something about himself that he's ashamed of.

We already wanted to believe that Michael wasn't guilty - but could the answer be more complicated than we suspected? Perhaps Michael *did* eat the Chinese food, but only because he was put up to it by one of his conniving siblings. Was he protecting someone?

We also met Ryan - Michael's younger brother. Ryan, we'd heard, was also a moody kid - around the time of the incident he was ten, and quick to tantrums. Plus, he'd started sleepwalking - exactly the state in which one might unwittingly wander down to the kitchen and eat something unconsciously, only to awaken in horror the next day realizing what you've done.

RYAN: Still a terrible sleeper. Yeah, sleepwalking, sleep-talking. Um... I've never been caught sleep eating, uh but I know it's a thing, you know, I know it's a deal so maybe I was sleeping eating....

On the flip side, however, Ryan's always claimed it couldn't have been him because he doesn't like Chinese food.

RYAN: I mean I eat it now like if I'm drinking, you know, hey that's good. But no, I'm never like, "Oh let's go out and get some Chinese food."

ODELIA: So wait, when you're drinking like uninhibited, then you-

RYAN: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Bring it on. Bring it on!

Ryan's siblings point to the fact that he claims to not like Chinese food, yet will eat it lustily if his inhibitions are lowered, as a smoking gun. Clearly, they say, he LOVES Chinese food, but has repressed his love for it, out of GUILT. It's...an interesting theory.

The youngest Falco sibling is Katie - who was only seven, and in a house with a heavy metal drummer living in the basement, two older sisters who liked to party, one somnambulant older brother and another on a perpetual quest to keep his true identity a secret - it's admittedly hard to imagine the seven-year-old is the one who snuck down to raid the fridge in the middle of the night.

Then again, Katie was not a normal seven-year-old. She was a hellraiser - and she was proud of it. She has a binder in which she's preserved all of her detention slips from school - a compendium of malfeasance featuring such dastardly deeds as bringing a live cat to algebra class.

KATIE: I mean two years before this all went down, I got kicked out of kindergarten. Like I was that bad.

ODELIA: How did you get kicked out of kindergarten?!

KATIE: I locked my teacher in the bathroom.

As shameless and gleefully mischievous as she was, Katie swears she didn't eat the Chinese food.

SAM: And just to be clear, nobody suspects you?

KATIE: No, no.

MICHAEL: I don't think so.

SAM: At all?

KATIE: No. I only ate mashed potatoes, french fries, and chicken fingers.

Which leaves us with our final two suspects - the parents. Kathy...and - you guessed it - Joe.

JOE: Everybody likes Kathy. If you could find somebody that doesn't like Kathy, I'd like to know their name.

KATHY: Oh, I could give you a few names.

JOE: Eh probably. But that's alright.

Kathy, of course, is the victim of the crime - and the one who called the infamous hours-long inquisition, after which Michael says he was found guilty. But: how did the Falcos become the kind of family that would hold such an inquisition in the first place?

[MUSIC SHIFT]

JOE: And I'm not sure why, you know, exactly why we got married. It seemed like the right thing to do so we did it.

KATHY: Because I asked you.

JOE: Oh is that what it was?

MICHAEL: You proposed?

KATHY: I did. Yeah, the girls always want to know what the romantic moment was. I say well, it wasn't as romantic as you thought.

ODELIA: Did you know at that point that you wanted a big family? Was that part of your plan?

KATHY: Uh, no. I have one sister and we don't have much of a relationship and I never, I don't think I ever thought about it. It was just whatever happens, happens.

JOE: ...honestly, I think it was whatever the Lord wanted, that's what we were going to have. I really, I believe that.

KATHY: We never did anything to avoid it.

JOE: We never did anything to avoid it. Whatever came, came.

What came were the six shady characters we've just introduced you to. At first, Kathy and Joe Senior were both working full-time, but before long Kathy quit to

be at home with the kids. And as a number of them told us, Kathy was always preoccupied with everyone's safety and well-being - sometimes to an extreme degree.

KATIE: Spunk ball, good old spunk ball. Now that's a ridiculous story.

At some point, Kathy apparently heard this story about a wave of incidents involving wads of cloth being soaked in gasoline being then tossed into cars that were stopped at traffic lights, accompanied by a lit match. They were referred to as spunk ball attacks.

KATIE: If we were to be driving down the driveway with our windows down, she would come out running, like, "Windows up, windows up. Spunk ball, spunk ball."

Katie and her siblings learned to deal with Kathy's fixation on danger - Katie told us it comes from a loving place, even if it doesn't always manifest itself in the most logical ways.

KATIE: For example on my drive here, she called me twice to tell me not to talk on the phone while I was driving. And I would say, "Then why are you calling?" And she'd laugh, she goes, "Oh, I know," and then she'd hang up.

But clearly, things like spunk ball and stolen leftovers aren't over the top or ridiculous to Kathy - they matter. *But why?*

Michael and Katie told us that the multi-hour inquisition which followed the theft of the Chinese food was not the first family meeting the Falco's had during those days.

MICHAEL: I thought family meetings were often associated with the "D" word. Divorce. It was always like, "This is it."

KATIE: Yeah. Oh yes, yes, yes. I would agree with that.

That's the thing about Joe Senior and Kathy - they don't always see eye to eye.

JOE: I do whatever I wanna do and I try to get her to do what she wants to do and we're not always on the same page. But we do what we want to do.

Around the time of the Chinese food incident, Joe Senior did what he wanted - he quit his job at a plastics company, which also happened to be the family's only source of income.

KATHY: You come home one night and you say "I have good news and I have bad news. Good news is I quit my job. Bad news is I don't really know what I'm going to be doing." So literally, I had cooked something and I left it on the stove for days. Because I just couldn't wrap my head around this...Everything was changing so, I went out and bought a house. And it was, it was a great house.

JOE: We do what we want to do.

[MUSIC]

Buying the house was a shot across Joe Senior's bow - if he was gonna play fast and loose with the family's financial security, Kathy was gonna move the family somewhere she thought they could afford to live, whether or not Joe Senior wanted to come along. Joe Senior eventually gave in and joined the rest of the Falcos at the new, smaller house - but tensions between Kathy and Joe Senior continued to simmer.

KATHY: And I used to always tell Katie, go pack her bags, we're going. We're going to my mom's, and then we never would go.

MICHAEL: Never?

ODELIA: Just you and Katie?

Kathy: We had already divided out who would get who.

MICHAEL: You guys divided out? Amongst yourselves? Is that true?

KATHY: I knew who we were getting.

MICHAEL: Mom divided out.

KATHY: I was gonna get you.

MICHAEL: Okay. Patty?

KATHY: And Patty and Katie. And your Dad was gonna get Julie, Ryan and Joe.

So it seems the Chinese food went missing at a moment when all manner of deception was brewing in the various corners of the Falco estate. And on the night of the incident, every suspect had a perfect motive - and a perfect alibi. After the break, we'll see if two imperfect investigators can finally solve the perfect crime.

SAM: So. It's a seemingly normal night in 1993. Tense as things were for the Falcos in those days, Kathy and Joe still found time now and again to sneak out for a date night. And on the night in question, they drove down to their favorite spot - a Chinese food restaurant that wasn't too expensive, but had tablecloths. By all accounts it was a pleasant meal - nobody announced they'd quit their job or purchased any real estate.

KATHY: And I had leftover Chinese food. And I had it and I had put the little box on top of it. and then you know how they would put paper around that to go box.

ODELIA: Was it like-

KATHY: Like checkered paper that little...

ODELIA: Oh okay.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

Kathy and Joe Senior made an early night of it - they arrived back at their house around nine-thirty or ten, and headed to bed. And a few hours later, as the sun was coming up...

KATHY: And so then I came down, probably for breakfast and thought I was going to eat it then. And I came down and I looked, and went to grab it, and the paper was just all over the plate, and the empty box.

Kathy summoned her six children. It was time for a family meeting.

[MUSIC]

One by one, the Falco siblings appeared, creeping downstairs in bleary-eyed confusion.

KATHY: So I asked who ate the Chinese. I said "Who ate the Chinese food?" All of them.

JOE: Uh. You want to say that again.

KATHY: Who ate the Chinese food.

JOE: No. You might have just been a little bit more vocal.

KATHY: So what did I say honey?

JOE: What do you think you said? Mm-hmm.

KATHY: Who ate the Chinese food?

JOE: Maybe a little bit firmer right?

JOE THREE: I just remember mom losing her you know what.

JULIE: Just like screaming and freaking out...

MICHAEL: I think it was like, you know, 'who ate the fucking Chinese food?'

Now up to this moment, the story pretty much matches what we've heard. Kathy has an out-sized reaction to something seemingly minor, everybody kind of rolls their eyes and grudgingly goes along with it.

Only here's where something fascinating happens: that bit about Kathy freaking out? That's the last part of the story that any of the Falco's seem to agree on.

PATTY: I remember we had to- we had to call each other out on a board.

SAM: Where was the board?

PATTY: Um, I thought it was in the family room, but somebody said it was on the back of a door.

JOE: No, your brothers would always say it was an easel.

But one of those brothers, Ryan, remembers even less than Patty.

RYAN: I- I vaguely remember that we all had to sit down. I vaguely remember that - I don't even know how old I was.

"I vaguely remember that we all had to sit down?" That hardly sounds like Michael's memory of a multiple-hour inquisition, resulting in a unanimous conviction by a jury of his siblings.

And as for Michael's memory that he was definitively judged to be guilty?

KATHY: I mean, basically, no one still wanted to say who ate the Chinese food.

JULIE: I feel like Ryan is the one who comes up the most in a group setting, just because of his aversion to Chinese food.

RYAN: Yeah, I don't want to say I'm guilty because I don't think I am, uh but I can't rule it out 100%.

ODELIA: You don't remember it at all, basically?

RYAN: No. No, it might have been like a fit of rage, you know, when people just lose their mind. I don't know. I don't know.

JULIE: I always assumed that like everybody was gonna blame me for it, and I- I don't know. I don't know if I did it. I've got a lot of repressed memories.

SAM: So you don't have a concrete memory of, okay, this evening of, you know, interrogation is settled and we've decided it was Michael.

JOE THREE: Right, I do not. Nope, I don't.

ODELIA: Do you remember who was judged guilty at the time?

PATTY: I don't remember there being a verdict at all...

KATHY: And so to this day, I still do not know who ate the Chinese food.

So for all of Michael's certainty about the verdict, nobody else seems to think he was the one who was actually found guilty. For the most part, when pressed, most of the Falcos ended up telling us some version of what Joe Three said:

JOE THREE: I mean, I don't really remember. I remember the stories more than the incident, I guess.

So if everybody remembers the story, but nobody remembers what happened...what, exactly, *is* this memory that's haunted the family for twenty-five years? Was there some other element in all this that we were missing? A clue in someone's interview that we hadn't focused on in the moment?

Of course there was.

[MUSIC]

There was something Kathy said in our first conversation with her that stuck in my mind.

ODELIA: Did you know at that point that you wanted a big family? Was that part of your plan?

Kathy: Uh, no. I didn't have a plan. I have one sister and we don't have much of a relationship.

It was quick, and went by so fast that we almost missed it. But the more I thought about it, the more it made me realize we might've been thinking about this story the wrong way.

Towards the end of our visit, we pulled Kathy aside and asked her to tell us a little bit more about that sister.

KATHY: She's a drug addict, and she lost her job for selling drugs. And she stole drugs, money from my mom. And she was in a nursing home because she had a lot of issues. And when it came time for her to go home, we had gone to visit her, you know, several times, and when it came time for her to come home I said, you know, just give me your phone number and we'll keep in contact, and she goes "I really don't want to waste my minutes on you."

Kathy says she and her sister were never close, and Kathy made up her mind that her own kids wouldn't ever be able to say that about each other.

ODELIA: Did that affect the way you raised your family?

KATHY: I think it probably did. Yeah, I think so. I mean I grew up in a very, very dysfunctional family.

To hear Kathy tell it, her father put his family through hell. Gambling debts, mafia connections - Kathy told us she married Joe Senior as quickly as she did in part because she wanted to get away from it all.

[MUSIC]

Say what you will about the Falcos, what with their overheated debates about seemingly trivial events, and occasionally cruel pranks. But having spent a few days with literally all of them - two parents coming up on fifty years of marriage, six kids *and* their spouses, most of them with multiple children of their own - I couldn't get over the fact that everybody there couldn't think of a better place to be than together at Kathy and Joe Senior's house, in the roasting late summer Kansas City heat, gamely re-hashing a story they've been telling and re-telling for twenty-five years. As someone who's too scared to visit my grandmother two towns over because I'm worried she's disappointed that I'm not married, who has to have a drink before I call my uncle, who has panic attacks on the rare occasions my parents are in the same room - I think that's beautiful.

And the thing is, it doesn't happen by accident. It takes effort. And the longer we spent with the Falcos, the more it became clear that the person putting in most of that effort was Kathy.

Spunk ball, threatening to take the kids to her mother's...the Chinese food inquisition. The way I see it, these weren't examples of moments that almost tore the Falcos apart. These were stories about Kathy fighting to keep the Falcos together.

KATHY: We're really a close family, and I would like to have it stay that way. So...you've really got to work at it.

Kathy's methods may be unorthodox - but from what I could tell after a few days in Falcoland - they work.

[music fades]

One thing that the Falco's always do when they're together is go on a pub crawl. They invited Odelia and I along one night, and as we were sitting in the back room

of a bar carved into an old boat, we decided it was time to settle this thing once and for all.

JOE: Now that we're all sitting in a bar and had a few drinks can we just vote now? Can we just vote now and..

KATIE: Revote revote! Revote!

It was time for another vote. Everyone wrote down their top three suspects on small slips of paper, and we put them in a hat. If ever there was going to be a confession, this was the time. Everyone was hammered, sweaty, leaning in close at the table, under a low-hanging lamp - and here we were, re-enacting the vote that supposedly happened at that family meeting in 1993. It was the most dramatic possible moment to reveal a secret you've been keeping for twenty-five years.

KATIE: Take the vote, take the vote, take the vote!

JOE NOVACEK: Hold on. If I'm your lawyer, I am not putting you on the stand.

And so, one by one, I started to pull the slips out of the hat.

SAM: So this first vote, it says "Chinese food"

MICHAEL: So the Chinese food ate itself.

But given the opportunity to give the Chinese food incident story its thrilling conclusion - nobody took it.

SAM: This person submitted three votes...three question marks.

We'll spare you the cacophony and just tell you: we received at least one vote for each sibling, as well as a couple votes for quote "a family ghost." Which I'm pretty sure was the Flacos making fun of me... Which was GREAT. For a moment, I got to feel like a Falco.

[ARGUING]

[MUSIC]

If, in the end, it doesn't matter who ate the leftovers, what does it mean that Michael's been carrying around this guilt for the last twenty-five years? For what it's worth, in all the conversations we had, we never got the sense that there was much in the way of family drama associated with Michael's coming out - though it's of course understandable that he was worried there would be at the time.

MICHAEL: I think I've spent so much of my life having to be good because I thought everyone thought I was bad. Uh, it's- I mean the same reason that I like baseball... Which is like when I was 12 and gay I was like looking for something that would show people that I was straight. And baseball was like a perfect- you know, it was like the perfect thing. Because like who's gay and likes baseball? Like you know, that was like in my mind at the time. And, you know, I do, I love baseball. But do I love baseball because I like baseball? I mean like, you know, I guess I do like baseball, but like the reason that I like baseball is very different than like just liking it. And it kind of feels like...am I good because like I'm really good? Or am I good because like I felt so bad that I had to be good and then like eventually I just became like, you know, someone that I think people think is a good person.

Sam: I don't know, there's a way of hearing it that's also analogue or a corollary to the chinese food story. Did you really love baseball? Or was baseball a way to tell yourself a certain story?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

[music fades]

Ryan: At this point, I- I've come to the realization that I don't think we'll ever really know.

That's Michael's brother Ryan, who may or may not have eaten the Chinese food in his sleep. We still don't know.

Ryan: I'm glad we have that story, for the most part, I'm glad we had every little bit of our childhood because it made us who we are. Um, you know. Seeing- seeing how dad works through stuff and seeing how mom, it definitely ... I feel like it's made me a better human being.

I have to admit, that's a conclusion I was not expecting from this investigation: I feel like this story has made me a better human being. And this was the moment where I felt like I finally understood the meaning of the Chinese food incident. The moment I realized that if the culprit was ever actually revealed, the Falcos would get closure, but they'd lose something way more valuable - the story.

So - on our last night in Kansas City, the family was gathered.

[Chatter.]

All the siblings and spouses and their kids, plus Joe Senior's mom, Nonny, who's in her nineties and had just gotten back from a poker game - four generations crammed into Kathy and Joe Senior's basement. We were watching a home video from the late eighties - Michael and his brothers and sisters unwrapping presents on Christmas morning, and then performing a play about the birth of Jesus, from a script written by Joe Senior.

[Chatter.]

As much as everyone was enjoying the memories, Odelia and I could sense the anticipation in the air. There were no more suspects to interrogate. They knew this was our last night. They were expecting a verdict. So - I stood up, timidly - a non-Falco in a room full of Falcos - and tried to tell them what I think it means to be a Falco.

SAM: We have not figured out who ate the Chinese food.

RYAN: Terrible resolution.

Sam: But! I think the theory that we have arrived at is that none of you guys want to know. And the reason I'm saying that is because everybody here knows how to push everybody else's buttons just enough so the bomb doesn't go off. And we kind of have a sense that in doing that, you like let off just enough steam that this incredibly rich connection of so many kids and so many kids of kids never weakens.

And the Chinese food story seems like the ultimate manifestation of that. Because you guys have been telling it for, what is it? Twenty-five years now. And it's this incredible way of saying 'I know you, you're the person who does this!' Like, you're the person who

says they don't like Chinese food so you're clearly traumatized by the fact that you ate the Chinese food! Or you're the person who was drinking a lot in high school so YOU must be the one who ate the Chinese food! Or you're the person who was always pulling those pranks, YOU'RE the one who ate the Chinese food!

And everybody has a perfect motive and a perfect alibi but nobody remembers the actual night in question. Everybody just seems to remember the story.

So we were forced to arrive at the conclusion that what is important here is not the Chinese food at all - but the story of the Chinese food. And the story is, I mean, not to be too cheesy, but the story is the reason everybody's here.

Michael: I pointed out to Sam and Odie, I think when that realization dawned on me, and Katie was like well yeah, I don't think they were just interested in Chinese food.

[MUSIC]

And so, the case is closed. But the story continues.

NONNY: They're passing this story on to their children and someday these children will talk about their family and the chinese food story.

KID: Oh, I thought it was spaghetti.

[LAUGHTER]

Family Ghosts is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman, with Odelia Rubin, Jennifer Lai, Jacob Smith, Lindsey Kratochwill, Jenna Hannum, and Janielle Kastner. Our story editor is Micaela Blei. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett, and featured original music by Ben Levin. Our theme music is by Luis Guerra. Executive producers for season two are myself, along with Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian at Spoke Media - find more great podcasts at spokemedia.io. Special thanks this week to Mia Lobel. To see Falco family photographs, and much, much more, please visit our website, family ghosts podcast dot com, where you can also sign up for our email list, the Ghost Post. If you'd like to follow our show on Twitter and Instagram, you find us at famghoshow - that's f-a-m-g-h-o-show. Stay tuned after the credits for a sneak preview of next week's episode, and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts* - where every house is haunted.