

EPISODE 8: *The Sasquatch of Spring Valley*

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

[theme music in]

ASHER: Hello!

SAM: Hello, hello.

ASHER: Should I put my headphones on?

I'm sitting in the studio with a political organizer named Asher. Asher's in his 30's - bespectacled, scruffy beard with flecks of red, and a quiet, contemplative demeanor. Eight years ago, Asher went to visit his uncle's apartment for the first time, in Spring Valley, New York - about an hour north of New York City.

Asher's uncle was named Omri - and Asher had never been to visit Omri before. This visit was only happening because a few days earlier, the Spring Valley police had contacted Asher's parents in Maryland - they'd found Omri dead in his red Ford Mustang by the side of the road. So Asher and his family drove up to Spring Valley to sort through all the belongings that Omri had unexpectedly left behind. When they arrived, they discovered a small, basement apartment - with every surface - countertops, chairs, the bed, the closets - crammed full of stuff.

At a live storytelling show in Brooklyn last year, Asher described the scene.

ASHER: There were, there were piles and piles of those sort of like knick-knack things that you buy. Like impulse buys at the end of registers. Like those, those little uh, uh, three piece cologne sets and perfume sets that you walk by on your way to the cash registers at Duane Reade, and you're like, who buys those things? Omri bought all of those things.

That wasn't all - the family spent hours sorting through unopened boxes of baseball cards, decades of racing forms, and toy horse figurines.

But Asher's in our studio today to talk about something else he found in the apartment - boxes and boxes of letters.

SAM: I'm looking at a - what is that, a two inch thick binder?

ASHER: It's a two inch... Yeah, two inch thick binder that's filled to capacity with, uh, letters.

SAM: So these are the letters you found when you went to clean out the apartment?

ASHER: Yeah. Yeah - so we found these in a series of probably four or five different boxes and shoe boxes and stuff under - I think initially found them under his bed, and found some in the closet and... Yeah, just sort of kept finding them.

[music in]

Asher has the letters preserved in a series of three-ring binders, which he brought in to the studio to show us. As we flipped through them, we saw that each of them was neatly handwritten in flowing cursive - the "i's" were all dotted with hearts, many of the letters began with the greeting, "Hello, Love!" - with an exclamation point, which was also dotted with a heart. The letters are from a woman named Renée, who Asher's never met.

And the letters are confusing for Asher, because they seem to be addressed to a man that Asher doesn't recognize from his limited experiences with Omri - of which, as he explained in that storytelling show, there weren't many.

ASHER: We saw him every now and then, but we never knew when he was coming. He would alw- he would, he would show up - and what I mean show up, I mean like we would wake up in the morning, and he would be sleeping in his car in our driveway, and then my dad would say, "I guess Omri's here to come visit us, guys!" And, and we would even say, like, "Omri... you can, like if you let us know, I mean, a. if you let us know like a normal person, like we can have like a visit. But also, you don't have to sleep outside - you can come into our house, like, you're a part of our family!" He was like, "no, I don't wanna bother anyone, like, I was just driving..."

The Omri that Asher knew preferred his car to a bed, and, as far as Asher can tell, preferred horse racing to...pretty much anything.

ASHER: My parents would make light of, not make fun of him, but make light of, you know, he was always this single bachelor, he would drive up and down the coast going to different horse racing events. Um. There was a really big one outside of Baltimore so we always kind of counted on seeing him at least once a year for Pimlico. But there were no, like we didn't make trips to go see Omri or anything like that.

During those bizarre visits, when the family would wake up to find Omri asleep in the driveway - Asher doesn't remember Omri saying much. He would talk about being excited for Pimlico, or his favorite pastries at the Rockland Bakery, where he liked to stop between fares during his long night-shifts as a cab driver.

ASHER: That's kind of all we really knew about him, that he went to horse races and he drove a cab.

[music out]

So when Omri died, and Asher found the letters from Renée, Asher became convinced that there was more to his uncle than baseball cards and drug store ephemera. That the truth about who Omri was was hiding somewhere in these pages.

ASHER: I think the first one is in 93, 94 and I think they go up to 2006 or seven...I mean she writes that she loves him in the letters.

So who was Renée? And who was the Omri she seemed to know so much better than anyone in his family ever did?

From Spoke Media, and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this is episode 14: *The Sasquatch of Spring Valley*. We'll be right back.

[Entering the house. Chatter.]

A few weeks after Asher's visit to the studio, we all drove down to his parents' house in Bethesda, Maryland. We sat around the dining room table, listening to their stories about Asher's uncle Omri.

SHELDON: He would come in four, five, in the morning, he would sleep through the day, basically to avoid seeing the people in the house. And then he would be up out all night, doing whatever he was doing...

That's Asher's dad - Sheldon. The first time he met Omri, Sheldon was visiting Asher's mom - Omri's sister - and it was early in their marriage, and one night, Sheldon fell asleep on the living room couch.

SHELDON: And sometime during the night, whether it was three, or four, or five, I just remember this large figure, we still joke about it, kind of coming towards me, like you know, walking through the living room. I thought, "What is that? You know like is the Sasquatch in Spring Valley?" And that was Omri. And I never really met him for a while because he was just this large, dark figure coming through the room.

Asher's mom - Liod - told us her brother struggled to find connection with people from an early age.

LIOD: I think it was hard for him socially, I think he tried to make friends by bribing them. At one point he was picked up for shoplifting when he was in high school. And he didn't know how really to interact with people.

ASHER: He bribed people? Really?

LIOD: Yeah. Yeah, he would give them things.

Liod remembers family friends calling to report things missing from their houses after Omri would come over to visit - and not just in high school. As early as age six or seven, her parents found themselves apologizing to the neighbors for Omri's thievery. Liod suspected that the stolen goods made their way to the playground at Omri's school, where he used them to make friends.

LIOD: I think that all of these were attention-seeking devices because he didn't know how to quote unquote "normally" interact with people. Yeah, so he would, you know, think,

you know, "It's okay to take something from you and give it to Asher because, you know, that way Asher will be my friend, and I don't care what you think of me."

At home, Omri found other forms of companionship.

LIOD: He loved cats...Growing up we had some strays that he took in that he brought home. And my father never loved cats, so they did butt heads on that, you know. My father grew up in Jerusalem and there were only stray cats in those days, and he said the only thing a cat is good for is for throwing stones at.

Liod described her father and Omri as being from totally different universes.

LIOD: My father came to this country with, you know, a wife and a young daughter and a hundred dollars in his pocket, and built himself up and, you know, made his own business, and became, you know, not wealthy, but certainly, you know, successful and respected in his field. And he would've always wanted my brother to take over, you know, the business. He was in excavation and construction. And he, you know, tried to show him the ropes and tried to teach him how to drive a machine, as he called it, a tractor or a bulldozer. And Omri was always looking for shortcuts.

Omri was much closer to his mother - she was the only person in the family he felt like he could talk to. But when she died of breast cancer when Omri was only 13, he was left alone with his father.

LIOD: My father couldn't even boil water, you know, I mean, nevermind know what to go shopping. And he was overtaken by his own grief, and, you know, just couldn't handle um, a child who was so needy, you know, emotionally, academically in, in all those respects.

By the time he got to high school, Omri was getting picked up for marijuana possession, and flunking his classes. And the last straw for Omri and his father was the arrival of Pearl - a divorcée up the street who started coming over to the house shortly after Omri's mother died. Liod says Omri was particularly incensed when their father informed Omri that Pearl was going to live with them. Omri issued an ultimatum: if Pearl was moving in, Omri was moving out.

LIOD: There was no way they were going to live under the same roof together. And ultimately my father supported his relationship with her rather than his relationship with his son.

[music in]

This was the moment when Omri took to the car - lurking the backroads and racetracks of upstate New York, alternating between his Mustang and his taxi, appearing sporadically in driveways and bakeries. Liod was away at college by this point, and over time, the family drifted apart. And so began this period Asher remembers of fleeting visits from his mysterious uncle.

Everything about Omri's life seemed to be a funny story.

LIOD: Then there was this other women that he brought here once with the nails.

Remember? You were at a baseball game.

ASHER: So - my memory of that is that she was a stripper.

LIOD: Could've been.

ASHER: That was how you explained her to me.

SHELDON: We never knew if they were girlfriends, or just companions, or just clients.

We never knew. There was always that vague - vagueness, is that a word?- that surrounded him. I mean, we never really asked.

Like Asher, they learned a lot of what they knew about Omri after he died, when they went to clean out the apartment. It was the first time they'd been there, too - they had to get the address from the police who discovered Omri's body in the Mustang.

LIOD: I remember all the humorous things we found, like little negligee things. Um, you know, again, but, but, as we were talking about before, as a child, you know, taking things and giving it to you and, and you know, hoping that you'll be his friend, um, I think that's what most of the things that we found. You know, whether it be the little jewelry pieces or all those books, or DVDs or the clothing, you know, of any sorts. You know, he was just very generous when he could be. And he didn't have two dimes to rub together. I

mean, he was always living from paycheck to paycheck. So yeah, we found his bank statement, and it had thirty-five dollars in it.

As near as they could tell, Omri gave away everything he earned from his taxi driving. In his mind, Omri had been kicked out of his own family, and it was almost like he was doing his best to make a new one out of whatever - and whoever - he came across.

LIOD: For someone who I didn't think really had any friends or close relationships that so many people we found did speak so highly of him. You know, "Oh, he used to come in here all the time and buy coffee from us." And "Oh, I remember him. You know we used to go to the races together." And you know, there were people who, I think he really impacted positively.

At Omri's hastily-arranged funeral in Spring Valley, Liod, Sheldon, and Asher met a few of those people.

LIOD: I want to use the word, "misfit," but not in a derogatory way, but also people who are a little off. You know?

About ten people showed up on the cold, drizzly afternoon that Omri was laid to rest. A couple lounge lizards from the off-track betting parlor. The girls who worked the counter at the bagel shop. A dispatcher from the taxi company. They wanted to give Omri a proper send-off. One of them brought a coffee table book about the New York Mets as a parting gift.

SHELDON: And he placed that on top of the coffin. And as they were lowering it, Liod's sister came over and she said, "That's a library book."

Back at Omri's apartment, tucked in amongst the odds and ends, the family found a few bits of evidence that Omri's kept them somewhere in his thoughts.

SHELDON: We found, he had these shelves, and there were a bunch of pictures of people. And among the picture was like, you know, the holiday cards that people send with children, and it says whatever it says. And there's a picture of my nephews, Liod's sisters' two boys who were then maybe six and eight. Or you know small kids at the time.

And they were on the beach. And there was a very sweet picture of the two of them. It was like Happy Holidays. And her sister was there and we were looking. And she said, "Oh, look it's the boys. Oh it's such a sweet picture." And it wasn't framed but it had to lean up against something. So we turned it over and it was taped to a box of porn. And it was Backdoor Sluts 11. I will never forget the name of this...

Of all the stories from those surreal few days in Spring Valley, Asher thinks this one might be the key to understanding Omri.

ASHER: It's kind of like a beautiful summation of Omri. Right, that like he wanted to like-

LIOD: Yeah -

SHELDON: Yeah.

LIOD: The two sides of him. Yeah.

ASHER: Yeah, like he wanted to keep the picture of his nephews, but like, couldn't be bothered to buy a picture frame.

LIOD: Right.

ASHER: But he was like, "Oh, I'll just leave it here next to something that I, you know, also like, care about."

SAM: And did I hear you correctly that it was taped to it?

LIOD: Yeah.

ASHER: So it stood up.

SHELDON: Yeah, so the picture, so he'd be able to have it displayed.

In the end, Omri seemed to frustrate his family. They couldn't figure out why he was the way he was.

LIOD: My aunt used to say that the only thing that Omri really needed was a good woman to love him... and that, you know, she recognized that, you know, here was a person who really just wanted to be accepted.

Which brings us back to those binders full of letters Asher brought to the studio that day. The letters from Renée.

ASHER: I feel kind of weird having them, honestly. You know, she, she had a deeper relationship with Omri than, than I certainly did, than I don't know whoever else did. And to honor that, you know, she, she should have them.

So that's our plan - to help Asher understand his uncle by bringing the letters back to Renée, so that maybe she can tell him who Omri really was. To tell him the rest of this years-long love story that Omri never shared with his family - the story that would have completely changed their perception of him as a lost, lonely soul, lurking in bakeries and watching porn in a basement apartment full of racing forms.

But there's one pretty big wrinkle in this plan - something Asher noticed when he started reading through the letters.

ASHER: The very first letter I remember is her going through AA in, um... in prison.

All of Renée's letters to Omri were written from prison, where she's currently serving a life sentence.

After the break, we try to see Omri through Renée's eyes.

We're back in the studio with Asher, trying to figure out if we'll actually be able to meet Renée - the only person who seems to have truly known Omri. The problem is that Renée is currently in jail.

In terms of Renée's crime - we're not gonna say much about it here. The details are very complicated, and don't really have anything to do with this story. All you need to know is that she's serving time for a crime she pled guilty to, and it's a life sentence.

We decided to write Renée a letter of our own, asking if she'd put us on her visitors list at the prison. And in the meantime, Asher, myself, and producer Jennifer Lai tried to get a better understanding of Omri and Renée's relationship. We spent a few days poring over the letters to Omri, which start in 1995 and run all the way through 2007.

The first letters are from the winter of 1995 - starting with that letter Asher mentioned before the break - the one about going to AA meetings at the prison. Renée wants Omri to know how much he means to her. She thanks him for taking care of her babies - by which she means her cats Princess and Romeo - and suggests that she and Omri should make a real baby one day. She tells Omri that the Celine Dion song *Think Twice* makes her think of him, and encourages him to check out Ozzy Osbourne and Melissa Etheridge, in hopes that he'll listen to their music and understand her feelings.

By early 1996, Renée is regularly telling Omri how badly she needs and wants him. She writes that while she spent much of her youth pretending to be tough, Omri saw through her facade - he recognized her as, in her words, "a scared little girl, who's now being forced to grow up the hard way." At this point Omri appears to also be dating another woman, named Trendy - and Renée is happy for him. She says she's not threatened by the presence of Trendy in Omri's life, as long as Renée is still his number one.

Later, she writes to Omri about her dreams for their future life together in Florida, if she's ever released from prison: she'll be a part-time waitress and part-time exotic dancer, while Omri finds work training horses. She tells him to research the best public school districts in Florida, so they can send their child there if they decide to have one.

Omri confides in Renée that he's self-conscious about his weight, and she tells him she loves him exactly as he is - but if he wants to lose weight, she recommends a diet with lots of ginger and egg whites, and sends him step-by-step meal prep instructions, so he can get started right away.

Throughout the letters, Renée chastises Omri for disappearing for vast stretches of time - she won't hear from him for weeks, and she pours out her heart, begging

Omri to remember that she has nothing to look forward to without his letters and visits.

[music out]

About two weeks after we sent our letter to Renée, she wrote back, in that same impeccable script she used to profess her undying love for Omri.

“Dear Mr. Dingman and Ms. Lai,” she wrote. “Not a day passes without me missing one of my best friends. Omri loved his sisters and family and I wish he’d been able to gain a close relationship with his nephew. Asher truly was cheated out of knowing a great guy.” Renée gave us her lawyer’s contact information, and said that as long as the lawyer didn’t object, she’d meet with us. We called the lawyer right away, who told us she didn’t have a problem with our visit - and a few days later, we were in the car with Asher on our way to the prison.

As we drove, we were going through some last odds and ends from the binders - little bits of folded paper that Asher had hastily tucked into the sleeves, but never really looked at. There were a few things we couldn’t make heads or tails of. A hotel room key envelope with the words “binoculars” and “Lexington” scribbled on it. Another cryptic note about someone named Craig and a missing VCR.

ASHER: There’s just alway- there’s just always more... there’s, there’s just a lot of surprises with him.

And then, this...

SAM: Did you know that Omri had been married?

ASHER: No?! No!

SAM: So at the end of the bi- at the end of the binder that I was going through, there were just all these like folded up papers. And so I was like, "Oh, let's just see what these are," and most of them were just empty envelopes that the letters had been in. And then there was this like triple folded thing that was like stapled together, uh, and at first I

thought it was a parking ticket. I thought, well, that makes sense, he drove around a lot. He's a cab driver. And then I unfolded it, and it is the record of a divorce proceeding...

The divorce record indicated Omri had been married for a little over three years in the late 90's - not to Renée, but to another woman, with an eastern-European sounding name. Asher didn't recognize the name, and when he called his mom, she said she didn't know anything about it. Evidently, Renée wasn't Omri's only secret romance. As with everything in Omri's life, nothing was quite what it seemed.

Including, as we were about to discover, his relationship with Renée.

We'll be right back.

We arrived at the prison, in the early afternoon of a rainy Wednesday. We pulled through the thick steel gates and up the long, winding drive towards a collection of squat, cement buildings with peeling tan paint, surrounded by tall, shiny razor wire. I counted thirty-seven rat traps lining the base of the wall outside the main building as we entered. Two guards escorted us into a dark, empty cafeteria, where we set up our microphones in a corner and waited.

It took a while for Renée to arrive - she's older now, and walks with a cane. She approached us cautiously, shuffling down a long corridor in a dark green prison uniform. She had straight brown hair that hung well past her shoulders, and she met us with a weary gaze and she shook our hands.

She held Asher's hand for a long time - she stared at him, and told him he reminded her of Omri.

ASHER: I just want to know more about who he was as a friend and, and as someone who you fell in love with.

RENEE: Okay. You know. To say the term, "fell in love with," I think that Omri and I, were both... We were both very messed up. And I knew how in love he was with me.

And then, Renée said something that changed everything we thought we knew.

RENEE: Over time, you know in prison, and I saw what he was doing to himself, to make him happy and to maybe turn him around, I might have tweaked it a little bit. Okay. I did tweak it a little bit, um to say that I, I was in love with him, and I was not in love with Omri... He was one of the most wonderful men I have ever known, truly. Um... Why I wasn't in love with him? I don't know. I really should've been, if I had been smart, but I wasn't so smart.

For the next several hours, Renée told us the true story of her and Omri.

[music in]

RENEE: He was dispatcher for a taxi company and I was cutting out of high school, and I needed a taxi to sneak me out of school. Yes, I did and um I had been up really late all night, so I had called and it was early, early in the morning and um, Omri was still on... and so we just started - he used to be the voice in the radio, you know, because he was on that radio, you know, talking on the dispatch, and I'd be on the telephone with him, and he would talk to me while I waited for the car to show up.

Renée told us she started calling the taxi service regularly just to talk to Omri after a long night. And at first, they didn't even know who the other one was - they were just friendly voices talking down the line.

But then, after a while of keeping her company on the phone while she waited for her cab, they did meet in person - Omri started coming to pick Renée up in his own taxi. He'd take her out for breakfast, and they would sit and talk.

And then, Renée stopped calling - she started seeing a guy named Tom, and moved in with him. But after a year, she told us, that relationship became abusive. Renée felt trapped - she didn't know what to do. And then...

RENEE: I ran into Omri in the mall and I started crying. And I told him what I was going through. And he said, "Well, come and move in with me." ... and um at this point, I was 18. He had known me for a few years, but I hadn't seen him for a year, and because I was with this abusive boyfriend. God forbid, I contacted anybody, with this abusive boyfriend. So I planned it, that, when he wasn't home, Tom wasn't home, that I was gonna go to

Omri's. And I packed up my stuff and off to Omri's I went. And I started um, dancing at a place right by Omri.

For Renée, moving in with Omri was a step up.

ASHER: Um. So, what was, what was he like to, to live with?

RENEE: He was awesome. He would always make you laugh. He would always make you smile. And he would always make you feel good about yourself...He would pump up music too. I don't know if you know this song, um, "Put the lime in the coconut."

ASHER: Yeah!

RENEE: And we would dance around the apartment. You know, and he would bring home cheesecake after work. He would bring me home a slice of cheesecake. He would cook anytime, make some wings, or always want to feed you, and always want to take care.

But Renée says Omri's giving nature was also his downfall.

RENEE: Once he learned how to, um, how to steal, and I might have had something to do with that, but when he learned how to do that, it was over. He started stealing this and stealing that. He loved to steal, um, things to give people gifts. He didn't steal for, you know, for himself. He stole for others, perfumes and stuff.

ASHER: I, I don't want to take away your credit for teaching him to steal...

RENEE: Oh, no?

ASHER: But that's actually something my mom said. When he was a kid -

RENEE: He probably didn't...

ASHER: ...he would steal, he would steal from other kids, to give to other kids. To make friends.

RENEE: Do you see?

ASHER: Yeah.

RENEE: That, in a nutshell, is who he was.

Eventually, Omri's gifts got him in trouble. He started meeting more of the dancers at the club where Renée worked. They'd tell him about their money problems, and Omri would offer to let them stay at the apartment.

RENEE: He would bring in um these strippers, now, I don't know if, if he was seeking a real friend like he found in me, I really was his friend. To this day, I'll always be his best

friend. But they weren't his friends. They were just using him... And he would bring them in, and they would be taking his whole paychecks. And he wasn't able to pay his rent. And he wasn't able to buy his heart medication.

Omri's money problems started to spiral out of control. His landlord was also his boss at the taxi company, and started garnishing Omri's paychecks to cover the rent. So Omri hatched a plan to cover his debts.

RENEE: He married somebody for money.

ASHER: Okay.

RENEE: Yes he did. So I never understood it, but yeah. He got paid, he got paid some thousands of dollars in some kind of workout deal with this woman and it, it helped her to stay in the country. And she was a hardworking woman.

But the marriage scheme wasn't enough. Omri was racking up more debt gambling on horses, and had also started using drugs. And the situation at the apartment was deteriorating rapidly.

RENEE: And there was one time I was, I went out shopping. I come back, and there is this girl and this guy in the kitchen. "Okay. Who are you?" "I'm Trina." "Okay. What are you doing here?" "Omri said I could stay here." "No, you can't. Get out." Now, remember, I had a serious attitude back then. "Get out. And take your little thing with you."

But the guy wasn't actually all that little - and when Renée tried to kick him and Trina out, he got aggressive, hitting Renée, and knocking her to the ground. A few seconds later, Omri came home, walking into the kitchen in the midst of the attack.

RENEE: I started screaming at Omri. I said, "Do you see? Do you see what you have done again?" I said, "This is her boyfriend. You think you're gonna get with her?" And he says, "That's what she said." I said, "Do you see what they did to me?"

Renée told us she was in the depths of her addiction around the time of this incident, and though she only weighed about a hundred pounds, she was so filled with rage that her screaming suddenly caused Trina and the boyfriend to panic.

RENEE: And I scared this guy! They run out the door and they leave. Now, I turned all this anger on Omri. "Are you crazy? You coulda had us killed. You can't just keep doing that."

But Omri did keep doing it. Eventually, Renée found her own place, and moved out.

RENEE: Through the years, I would call and I would say, so to know what's going on, and he'd be highly upset about a girl, "Get her out. I mean, what are you doing? Get her out!" This was basically over and over again.

Every time, Renée would threaten Omri - she'd refuse to speak to him until he did something about his latest toxic roommate arrangement. And every time, Omri would come to her with his head bowed in shame.

RENEE: "Don't be mad at me." "Is she gone?" "Yes. I put her on a plane." "You paid for her plane ticket? My God." Yes. This was his story. But through all this, I want you to remember though...Omri was smoking a lot of drugs. I mean, we're talking, not just marijuana, we're talking freebase, sniffing cocaine... And yet, throughout all that, he was there whenever I needed him. And I didn't like to need him. You know. But whether I asked, whether I didn't ask, he was always there.

Omri was out of control - and Renée's always had a hunch about what was underneath it all.

RENEE: I think that um because of his, like his need for his mom and that, that female connection, that female bonds, I think that he was seeking it with women, but he was getting it with a lot of rejections and a lot of hurt, because his mom was so good - like, your real, your real grandmother. She, she was so good, I mean, the stories that I, that I've been told by Omri of the beautiful things... of, of like when he was little, you know, when he was talking about her, and he would cry.

ASHER: Is there, is there one that stands out? I mean, it's also- I ask, I asked my mom a lot but I obviously never got to know my real grandma, and we also anytime I would go visit my grandfather and Pearl, there were only a couple times when Pearl wasn't there that I could talk to him about her.

RENEE: When Omri was little, you know, and um he's crying, and he's wiping his face like this, and his mom comes over and she, she put her hands on his head, and squats on down to him and says, "What is it? What has you so upset?" And he goes to tell her and he starts crying, and she says, "Don't you know it doesn't matter? It's gonna be okay. Come here. Come here. Come here," and gives him a hug, and just held him. And he said, "She was so soft." And he had not felt fully safe since his mom and that's been his problem. He has not been safe.

Renée knew so much about Omri's family - but she could tell they weren't interested in making her part of it. She told us Omri took her to visit his father and stepmother once, and they wouldn't let Renée into the house.

RENEE: I wasn't exactly welcome. Remember, I was like, I was... I was the symbolization of all of his problems.

Renée's parents didn't have much use for Omri, either - they were convinced he was the one who'd gotten Renée hooked on drugs.

RENEE: My parents still to this day. "Oh no, it was Omri." And I, I'll tell them over and, "It's not him. It wasn't him. It was me."

So, each blamed by their families for each other's downfall, Omri and Renée just had each other - and their own very particular kind of friendship.

ASHER: So did your, did your relationship ever get romantic...if that's okay to ask?

RENEE: Romantic no. Sexual, yes. When somebody wants you so bad and they've done so much for you it's not even like "Oh, I owe them. You know, let me lay down for them." You want to make them happy and you know that will make their whole world and here it is Valentine's Day and you offer that one gift that one time. Yeah, does it make you feel super important? Of course. There you go. Yeah. Definitely I did have one then. Now? Not so much. Did I maybe need that? Probably. I don't think that myself worth was very high then. You know, um, as far as what else I had to contribute to the world I felt that's what I was worth, but I knew I had that to give, and here is this man who happens to be my best friend too. How do you deny someone so thirsty for something? And so it's Valentine's Day and I gave him a gift and I know, honestly, I think that out of anybody that I ever been with, he cherished that gift more than anybody else would and I certainly do not regret it... At all.

[music in]

In prison, Renée got clean - but she knew Omri was in a precarious position without her in his life.

RENEE: He came here one time and he cried. He cried, his shoulders wracked, he was broken. What do you do with that kind of realness? I was that backbone, I was that one to say, "Hey, come on, come on, come on what are you doing? What are you doing here? Cut this crap out, you're stronger than this." "I don't know, I don't know what I'm doing?" You know. "What do you want me to say? That's why I need you." "Oh no, oh no you need to get your feet under you." He was stuck because no matter what he did he couldn't make those ends meet.

It was too late for Omri - he was too far gone financially, emotionally, and physically. He died of a heart attack, alone in the Mustang.

[music out]

Asher's always suspected that there was more to Omri than the caricatured stories his parents told - more than the pastries, porn, and perfume sets.

ASHER: That's just sort of how he was viewed but I don't think that's fair to him, and I don't think that was true. Um, I think he was never really given a chance or an opportunity for whatever reason.

In the eight years since Omri's death, Asher told us he's moved apartments seven times. He doesn't take much with him when he goes - but he's always kept the binders of letters, convinced the truth was somewhere inside them. It turns out that truth is pretty different than what he imagined - and that it wasn't hiding in the letters themselves, but rather with the person who wrote them.

RENEE: You had a really, really good man for an uncle. You can do worse than to follow in his footsteps, without doing all the other stuff. But he would be so proud of you.

Renée confessed that she was anxious about talking to us for our story - the memories of Omri are stormy, and painful to relive.

RENEE: I'm still... You know, I still have a hard time. I still talk to him. As shortly ago as right before I came to see you. And I said, "Omri...I know you would do this for me."

Omri may be gone, but Renée still feels their connection. A connection they made without Omri giving her something he stole. Instead, they gave each other something no one else in their lives ever could.

RENEE: Somebody totally accepts you for who you are...unconditionally. And it never changes? I accepted him completely - even for the screw-up that he was. But he accepted me as the screw-up that I tend to be too. And I was definitely a screw-up back then. But love doesn't just die, you know? And we loved each other.

We went to visit Renée expecting her to tell us a love story - and she did. Just not the kind we're used to hearing. It was a story that didn't make sense to anyone else in Renée and Omri's lives. But for them, it didn't have to.

RENEE: I used to ride in his taxi. For as many hours as he was working, I was in that taxi and we would just talk or just be, just be.

[music fades]

[FG Theme in]

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 Evan Viola. 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, and to Steve Fishman. To see photographs of the letters and documents that Asher found in Omri's apartment, and much, much more, please visit our website, familyghostspodcast.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 can 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 story, and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts* - where every house is haunted.

Next time on *Family Ghosts*, Kirya grows up staring out the windows of her childhood home, dreaming of a different life...

KIRYA: I'm just sitting there staring out at these trees, and they don't do anything. They don't change.

Kirya's always wondered if the keys to a different version of herself might have something to do with the stories of her grandfathers, about whom she grew up knowing only tall tales. One of them was Benjamin, who lived on the streets of Berkeley California...

HOWARD: Sometimes he could fix his gaze upon just one person, and it would be so strong that the person would become immobilized.

KIRYA: That sounds almost mystical!

HOWARD: He had that effect on a lot of people.

The other was Gus, an international businessman with grand tales of globetrotting adventure...

KIRYA: And he would tell me things like, oh yeah, when I was in Australia, the flies were so thick that he couldn't open his mouth or a swarm would come inside and try to make nests there.

Raised with little more than apocryphal stories about both of these mythic figures, Kirya wants to know why nobody's ever told her the truth about who they were - and what their real stories can teach her about herself. Join us next week, when Season Two of *Family Ghosts* continues.

