[Snap Judgment intro]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** You've heard it. I know you have. Just when you're feeling down, just when you're feeling lonely, just when you're feeling defeated by life's travails, it's always right then, at your lowest point, you always count on someone, someone to come grinning all up in your face, talking about, "Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. Don't worry, be happy." And as good as it might feel to reach way back and just slap that person in the teeth as hard as you can, I'm going to ask you to please, please hold off for just a moment. Because today, we're not going to just deal with the results. No, instead, we're going to go in search of the cause. Snap Judgment proudly presents Don't worry, Be Happy.

My name is Glynn Washington. And yes, you're going to exhale that breath you didn't know you were holding when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** We begin with a story within a story. It comes to us from our dear friend, a former Snap Judgment superstar producer, Stephanie Foo, who recently took a break from making radio. This is her return. You should know the story contains strong language, some violence, and a mention of suicide because this is a real story that discusses real memories. In this piece, as you will see, Stephanie investigates someone else's story in order to shed some light on her own. Stephanie, take it away.

**Stephanie:** Would you describe your mom as anxious?

**Mimi:** Yeah, I think she is-- [Stephanie chuckles] [chuckles] I think she should be-- [crosstalk]

**Stephanie:** Your face.

**Mimi:** [laughs] This is going to be on the radio, right? They're not going to see my face? [laughs]

**Stephanie:** No, but I can tell them that your face is like, "Yeah, duh." [chuckles]

**Mimi:** [laughs]

**Stephanie:** Mimi Nguyen is 26. They've got two-tone hair. The right side of their head is blonde and the left is black, and long lash extensions on their eyes, which always give away their emotions, especially when they're talking about their mom, Thanh. Their brow knits, and they look off into a corner whenever they tell me about her. Mimi and Thanh used to be close when Mimi was a little kid. Their dad left them when Mimi was really young. So, it was just Mimi, Thanh, and Mimi's grandma. But as they got older--

**Mimi:** She wouldn't let me walk home from school even though it's like a 20-minute walk. She thought I would always get kidnapped or just die somehow. She tells me, "There are kidnapper and killers out there." I'm like, "Mom."

**Stephanie:** Mimi and Thanh are Vietnamese. Thanh came to America in the 80s and still doesn't know much English. But Mimi's mom kind of went beyond the helicopter, first-gen mom stereotypes. Her paranoia was pretty extreme. It actually got worse when Mimi started college. For example, when Mimi stayed out late studying at the library.

**Mimi:** I have a very strict regimen, so I don't check my phone when I'm studying. On the nights where she really was anxious, she would ring up my phone like 20 times.

**Stephanie:** Understandably, this drove Mimi crazy. When Mimi wouldn't answer the phone, she'd leave these messages.

**Mimi:** Where she's crying and just being like, "Mimi, where are you?" She would say things that hurt, like, "Don't you love me? Why don't you love me? How could you do this to me?"

**Stephanie:** Whenever Mimi had friends over, Thanh would also sneakily ask for all of their numbers, just in case. Then, on nights like these, she'd call all of them repeatedly too.

**Mimi:** And then, they would have to text me like two or three times, like, "Hey, your mom called me and she's crying. She sounds really upset. Are you okay? What are you up to?" I was like, "Dude, I'm so sorry. I'm studying and I'm not looking at my phone. I don't have time for this." They're just like, "It's okay. Can you just call back your mom though?" I didn't understand it. I don't know why my mom would have such a bad emotional reaction.

**Stephanie:** Until finally, in college, Mimi started taking some psychology classes and started to realize there might be something deeper going on with Thanh. A reason behind her anxiety and paranoia.

**Mimi:** I remember one time she said, like, "Oh, I forgot this isn't Vietnam." I feel that's like war vibes.

**Stephanie:** Mimi knew Thanh was a refugee of the Vietnam War, but Mimi knew nothing else about Thanh's history. Thanh would clam up whenever Mimi tried to ask questions, and blame it on the fact that Mimi's Vietnamese wasn't good enough to understand her and she couldn't talk about in English. But really, that only seemed like part of the problem. Mimi remember this one time that their dad came over to visit.

**Mimi:** He was telling me like, "Oh, when I was back in Vietnam, I used to have a really big house, and I had all these cars. And then, the communists came in and they took all of it." My mom would be around the corner, furious and just like, "Hey, what kind of stories are you trying to tell a child? Don't say things like that to her." My dad would just be like, "What? It's just a story. I'm just telling her about my life." She's like, "Don't tell her about things like that." It was super intense. I've never seen my mom as livid around anybody else in my life.

**Stephanie:** The more Mimi thought about it, the more they realized they had no understanding about who Thanh was as a person. Thanh had built these impenetrable walls around so much of her past, walls around any kinds of vulnerabilities. She rarely talked about her troubles with money. She didn't talk much about what happened with Mimi's dad. Mimi learned pretty late that he'd had other families and kids they'd never met. And then just recently, she kept one huge secret that was beyond the pale. Thanh called Mimi in one day and said, "I have to tell you something. Your father died."

**Mimi:** The funeral happened and my mom knew about it, and she chose not to tell me. I was like, "Why are you telling me this now?" She's like, "I've thought about it long and hard, and I feel like you would have been upset if I didn't tell you information like this. So, I told you. Okay, how do you feel?" I'm like, "I don't know how to feel yet."

**Stephanie:** That was a half-truth. It was more like Mimi didn't know how to feel about it in front of Thanh.

**Mimi:** She really wants to care for me and comfort me, but her emotional toolbox is very limited. She'll kind of cool me a little bit, like, "Oh, what's wrong?" And then I'll tell her what's wrong. And then, she'll go like, "It's okay. Just be happy." So, pretty much suppress and keep them away. I feel that's a lot of pressure.

**Stephanie:** How did you feel about your mom keeping this a secret from you?

**Mimi:** It was pretty fucked up, in my opinion. Of course, I'm upset, but there's just so many things that she keeps in the dark, and I can't talk to her about it.

**Stephanie:** So, for a long time, the way Mimi dealt with all of these secrets was just to create distance. Mimi left Thanh's walls up and put up their own. This worked okay until this thing happened that seemed to blow a hole in the wall and gave Mimi a glimpse of the truth. Mimi was still living at Thanh's and was studying at around 1:00 AM, when they heard Thanh screaming in her bedroom.

**Mimi:** I go over and it's just my mom alone in her room. She was just yelling in her sleep, "Help us. Don't take her. Don't take her. She's not yours." I shake her and I'm like, "Mom, what's wrong? What's going on?" She's not fully there. She's just like, "Oh, I just had a memory of my friend being kidnapped. I was walking with two of my friends. And then when I turned around, both of them weren't there anymore. So, I was screaming for help, for anyone to help."

**Stephanie:** Then, her mom dozed back to sleep. In the morning, Mimi checked in with her again.

**Mimi:** She's like, "What are you talking about?" I told her what happened, and I'm like, "Did you have a friend who almost got kidnapped and you had to rescue her?" She's just like, "Oh, yeah. Don't worry about that." I'm like, [chuckles] "I know nothing about you."

**Stephanie:** That unlocked something in Mimi. Thanh's secrets might have been incredibly traumatic, and Mimi had to know them in order to understand Thanh, to try to have a better relationship with her. Things had gotten so tense between the two of them, that a couple years ago at the age of 25, Mimi finally moved out to get some space from her. But Mimi didn't want that strain between them. Mimi wanted to say to Thanh--

**Mimi:** "I understand that you're uncomfortable, but I still want to know. There's so many secrets that my grandma had and just died with her. I don't want that here. I want to know your story, my story."

**Stephanie:** That's why Mimi decided enough was enough. Mimi asked Thanh if she'd finally sit down and share her story and Thanh agreed, but she said she'd rather have a translator present so she could fully express herself.

**Mimi:** That's why I was hoping that if you did an interview and you had to translate us, I will learn so much more.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My name is Thanh Nguyen and I have been living here for about 32 years.

**Glynn:** Coming up, Mimi finally asked her mother the secret she's been hiding for her entire life. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Don't Worry, Be Happy episode. When last we left Mimi, they decided that enough was enough, that they were tired of not knowing their family's history. Mimi asked Thanh, if they could finally interview her about the secrets of her past. At long last, Thanh agreed. Sensitive listeners should know, Thanh's response does contain graphic descriptions of wartime. Snap Judgment.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My name is Thanh Nguyen and I came to the United States in 1989. I have been living here for about 32 years.

**Stephanie:** We're all sitting down in Mimi's old bedroom in Santa Ana. Mimi and me in her bed, Thanh and the translator on office chairs across from us. Photos of Mimi as a kid, hugging their mom, decorate the shelves behind them. I get things started.

Can you tell me some of the things that you admire about Mimi?

**Thanh:** [chuckles] [sobs] I'm very happy. [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I'm happy to have Mimi because I think she's the gift from God to me.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Life is not easy. But Mimi always tries her best. Because my English and my time is limited, I have to work, I cannot help her with that, she just helps herself. And I am so proud that she can take care of herself and I am so happy for all her success in life.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language] [sobs]

**Mimi:** [chuckles] It's not like she hasn't said something like this before. It's just, God, she just came in so hard so quick. [chuckles]

**Stephanie:** Then, Mimi gets it together and says what they're here for.

**Mimi:** I feel like knowing more about you would help me understand more of like who I am and why I am the way that I am. And I think it would help our relationship too if we talked more about this past, your past. I want to be a better daughter and support system by being able to do all this, to get to know more about you and your history.

So, where were you born and what was your house like?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Actually, I was born in North Vietnam in 1954. I followed my parents when I was two years old. That was the first exodus of the Vietnamese people from the north to the south. I just stayed in one house in the [unintelligible [00:14:43] district in Saigon. They were all homes made of palm leaves. Our life was so simple. We struggled, and studied and also so good, like sugarcane. Life was well long ago. It was different, but it was happy.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Thanh says she lived with her little brother and her mom. And the translator asks, "What about your father?"

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I never asked my mother about my photo because at that time, I was little. I was cold toward that kind of thing. But my younger brother, he asked about him.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My mother just said, in general, he went to the army and then he passed away or something, or disappeared. And that's why my mother became a single mom.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Mimi has never heard any of this. They seem excited to finally be learning more about their mom. But Mimi also looks nervous. This is pretty surface level. Was Thanh going to go deep with us on the heavy stuff? I see Mimi steal themselves and take the plunge.

**Mimi:** What's the best memory you have from your childhood and what was the worst?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Actually, I don't have any you say as bad memory because when I was little, I lived a simple life. I had a normal childhood. I was happy. So, I don't think there was anything bad in my childhood memory.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Are you saying anything bad?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** No.

**Stephanie:** Me and Mimi look at each other. Mimi rolls her eyes. But then, Mimi remembers a specific thing they'd heard Thanh mention briefly. Something about her first period. "Oh, yeah." Thanh says.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** When Mimi was 12 years old, when she got her period. It happened to me when I was 12-year-old too. Same time. Same time happened to me. But in that year, I remember in 1968, that is the Monkey Year in Vietnam. That is the war year in Vietnam.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My village was bombed. [unintelligible [00:17:40] village was bombed by the enemies. And all the other houses around me were bombed. Totally collapsed. Only my house was okay. But we still ran away from the battlefield.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** We ran to the Vinh Nghiem temple. And on the way to the Vinh Nghiem temple, I felt blood. I was bleeding.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I told my mom, "Oh, my God, I got hit. I got shot or something," because I was bleeding.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Until we reached the temple, and my mom tried to find out what happened to me and she knew that I just got my first period.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Was anybody hurt from that bombing in your village?

**Jenny:** Some villagers in my village was injured by the bombing but none of the members of my family got hurt.

**Stephanie:** That sounds like it was-- if it were me, I'd be terrified.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** You know, at that time, I was just 14 or 15. I was too young, just a teenager, and I didn't have any concept about war. Even though some villagers, their children died and they were crying, still, it didn't hit me that way. I still remember my brother and I, when we ran away from the bombing, we were smiling. We were kind of excited.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Then, she lightens up, smiles, and eagerly tells us the story about how at first during the bombing, some people in the village abandon their home for shelter, and one woman ran to their home carrying her baby, Long Qi, in a blanket.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** But when she entered my house, she found out only the blanket was on her hand and there was no baby. So, Long Qi was just gone, and she was panicked at that time and was just crying and my mom went to the backyard. And found Long Qi under the banana tree. And now, Long Qi is living in Las Vegas.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** We all breathe a sigh of relief for Long Qi.

[chuckles]

**Stephanie:** Mimi had always been in awe of her mom's stoicism, but now she was taken aback by her mom's laughter about this tragic story. Then, Thanh tells us she really wasn't fazed by any of this. But she remembers her mom taking it really hard.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I think my mom understood the effects of war better than me because at that time, she was a single mom, and she already escaped the war in 1954 from the north to the south. That's why she understood war better than me.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** She confided in me, like, "Oh, that was so scary. It will happen again."

**Stephanie:** I look over to Mimi, sitting next to me in the bed to see how they're doing.

How are you feeling?

**Mimi:** I feel horrible. Terrible.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** She had been gone for seven years now.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** She took care of Mimi a lot. It makes sense that she misses her.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Mimi:** The fact that she had to do it twice in her lifetime.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** She had a much harder life than I did. And then now, it's onto your life, and you have such a good life. It's just grandma that suffered so much.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language] [chuckles]

**Stephanie:** Can I ask you where you were and what you were doing when the fall of Saigon happened?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Before the fall of Saigon, I was a teacher in my district.

**Stephanie:** The day that it happened though, did you have to run?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** At that time, after the fall of Saigon, actually no war or no battlefield inside of Saigon where I lived. Only some bombing that happened in Tan Son Nhat Airport. It was near my house, but that’s it. Nobody ran away from the war in other regions.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Only some bombing near my house but that's it. I thought about the author, Viet Thanh Nguyen, who wrote, "Haunted and haunting, human and inhuman, war remains with us and within us. Impossible to forget, but difficult to remember." But I thought I'd give it one more shot.

Can I ask, you said when you were a kid, you didn't really have an understanding, it wasn't really scary. And then when you got older, you started to realize. What was the moment from when you started to realize that this is serious?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My turning point about war happen when I was about 22, 23 years old when the fall of Saigon happened. I looked up I saw helicopters, the soldiers, the air force of the Southern army was flying over my house.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** And then, the enemy's army shot up. And then, all the soldier from the airplane fell down in front of my house. And so--

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

[somber music]

**Stephanie:** Thanh's brother was also a helicopter pilot in the Southern Vietnamese Air Force, and he was flying into the airport that was being bombed.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** My mother and I, we were so panicked, because we worried about him. He might be dead. It might be just like that other helicopter that I noticed. That's why we worried, we cried. And that time, we did not know what happened to my brother. Half an hour, it changed my concept of life, of war.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Wow, that's a horrible thing to have to witness.

**Mimi:** Yeah, I wanted to ask her, I also want to segue into that night terror and that dream.

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Mimi:** Do you remember when I was living here before I left, one night at 1:00 or 2:00 AM, you cried out while sleeping, "Help me, help my friend." When I asked you the next day, you said you didn't remember, but you said you're young and you had lost a friend. Was that real or was it just a dream?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I think it was just a dream. But there's one thing, in my life during the war, I kept hearing my friend saying, "So and so has been caught." I used to go and pray for those who were lost, like neighbors. You'd see a neighbor one day and the next day, they'd be shot and killed. I could never understand how war can rob people away that quickly and easily.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** The day that they shot Tan Son Nhat Airport, in front of my eyes, I saw two soldiers die by suicide. When they heard that the North was coming to revolutionize, they stripped off the uniform, and-

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** -then killed themselves. I saw two of them. I couldn't understand, but I felt sad for the battle. They had to sacrifice their youth. They were so young, just in their 20s, 21, 22, not even 30.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** Thanh tells us that the Southern soldiers had to kill themselves because they believed when the North came in, they'd kill them anyway. As Thanh tells her story, Mimi moves from the bed onto the floor where they lean their head onto their mom's lap. It's kind of like they're becoming a little kid again.

**Mimi:** Hearing the way she grew up and had to face death so much in front of her and tried her best to have stability.

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Mimi:** You always said to be happy all the time. "Think of good things, just know of good things." I didn't want to hear that. I wanted you to hear about my life. I want to help with that. But now that I hear more of your story, I understand why you said that, because you have so much behind you.

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Today, we have to thank the translator and you in asking about these thoughts to understand them. When Mimi talks about these things, I understand but I wanted to erase the idea that life is so sad. I didn't tell all these stories and I didn't want my child to be weak. Be strong. But I couldn't say much, so I just said, "Cheer up, be happy." That was my idea.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** So, you were trying to protect her?

**Thanh:** [chuckles] Yeah.

**Stephanie:** I know you've held back some of this stuff for a long time. What does it feel like to tell it?

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I'm very happy today. I'm very happy today that Mimi, my daughter, wanted to know what happened in my life in the past.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Mimi:** Is there any way that you can share more about your life with me with them not being here? [chuckles] Not with translators or with other people?

**Thanh:** Yes.

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Mimi:** But how? Normally, when I'm trying--

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** If you want, you have to speak more slowly. I don't speak English well. I didn't understand you or what you wanted.

**Mimi:** I said I want to understand your life.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** I didn't realize the gravity and the point today. With the translator, now I understand and I will try.

**Thanh:** Yeah.

**Mimi:** But every time I try.

**Jenny:** [Vietnamese language]

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Jenny:** Okay, sorry. I'll try now. If you want, I will sit down and talk to you. Plus, now I have more time. What a feeling, I have a relative for a lifetime.

**Thanh:** [Vietnamese language]

**Stephanie:** There's a sense of openness in the air that there wasn't before. It feels good. Immediately after we turn off the recorder, Thanh goes back in host mode and forces a bottle of water and a packet of facemasks on me. And I'm thinking maybe we opened a door that I hope stays open. I tell Mimi I'll check back in with them soon.

Several weeks later, I called Mimi to see what the aftereffects of the interview were, and I was shocked. Just a month after the interview, Mimi had done something they really didn't think they'd ever do. After a breakup, Mimi moved back in with their mom. At first, Mimi was really nervous that Thanh and them would fall back into their old negative patterns. But Mimi was surprised to find things were different now, like when the two of them sat down to talk about the breakup.

**Mimi:** When I was telling her about my breakup, and I was sad and crying, she wanted to kind of give me advice. "Life is short. Be happy. You're here now. Everything is safe. I have a home for you. You don't have to worry."

**Stephanie:** At first, Mimi was irritated at what they saw as Thanh suppressing their feelings. But then, Mimi thought back to Thanh's story.

**Mimi:** Now that I know what her life has been like, so why she would give me that kind of advice, I was able to address that. It was great that I was able to like, "Mom, I understand why you'd say that. But I don't think it helps me to hear it right now." Now that we understand each other a lot better after that interview, it was a lot easier to be vulnerable about where I was at. Eventually, I just want to cry. And she's just like, "Well, it's hard to see you cry, it'd be sad. You're my daughter and I love you." I was just like, "Yeah, be sad with me then." And then, she offered to hug me and just rub my back and we're just hugging and I was just crying. And then she's just like, "Yeah. I know it's been hard." [sobbing].

I'm holding a box of tissues and I pass it to her and I'm like, "Have some. Sit and cry with me." And then we laughed, as we also sat in the sadness.

**Stephanie:** The other day, Mimi went out on a date and stayed out until 2:00 AM. Her mother never texted or called.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** The original score for that story was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Super Snapper, Stephanie Foo. Our interpreter for that story was Jenny Tai of Translation [unintelligible [00:34:06]. The actress who played Thanh Nguyen was Elise [unintelligible [00:34:09]. Stephanie Foo, one of the original producers of Snap Judgment. She just wrote a memoir about her own complex PTSD. It's called *What My Bones Know*. And it speaks to so much. After the break, we're going to come back and talk to her about it. Stay tuned

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Don't Worry, Be Happy episode. My name is Glynn Washington. We just heard an amazing story from producer, Stephanie Foo. I spoke to her about how someone else's past can impact our own future. Again, this piece does discuss some real issues, including living in a violent household. Stephanie is back with us to break it down and tell us what she's up to now.

I'll just get started, Stephanie. It reminds me of when we started Snap Judgment. This was before podcasts were podcasts, before they were a real big deal. And you had your own podcast that you had made, I believe it was, "I Want to be on This American Life."

**Stephanie:** Get Me on this American Life.

**Glynn:** Get Me on This American Life. I remember, Stephanie, that it was horrible.

**Stephanie:** [chuckles] Thank you.

**Glynn:** Um, really, really bad. But you put so much effort into that. And we're like, "This woman can work." We thought, "Well, let's hire her because she's making stuff."

**Stephanie:** I was very lucky to get the job with you guys, because you definitely let me find my own voice and use whatever music I wanted a lot of the time and kind of go crazy. And you kind of unleashed a monster, because I made 50 stories a year for the four years that I worked there.

**Glynn:** Wow. There's no question. You were talent from the start. And back then, Steph, you were driven, but you were more than driven. It was like there was something chasing you.

**Stephanie:** Yeah.

**Glynn:** Your work ethic was like you were just being chased by a dragon.

**Stephanie:** [chuckles] Yeah. I found this tweet today that I made July 9th 2012 when I was working for you, where I say, "Thank God, back to work. I hate vacations. Bring it on next episode." [chuckles] Which, in retrospect, might be a little problematic. I was working that much, not just because I was passionate about the work, which I was. But because I was trying to bury some feelings and some trauma that I really didn't want to think about.

**Glynn:** Looking back, it seems like, did I treat this person properly? We're the beneficiaries of this force, of this energy that was animating you. I wonder if that was a good thing. We were like, [chuckles] "Stephanie, go home. Stephanie, go home. Stephanie, go home." But you didn't--

**Stephanie:** I remember staying until 5:00 in the morning and then went out at 6:00 or something. I had this idea that I was indispensable, and that I needed to be there or else, all havoc would be let loose and we would fail somehow, because we were so small. We were such a tiny team. But it probably wasn't so healthy for me to be working 70, 80 hours a week. That was the only tool that I had at my disposal at that time to deal with my trauma. But yeah, there was some deeper stuff going on there.

**Glynn:** Yeah. You wrote a book about some of that deeper stuff, right?

**Stephanie:** Right. I think "traditional" PTSD, posttraumatic stress disorder, we're all familiar with that. If you have a single moment of trauma, if you are hit by a car, let's say, you can have PTSD from that and feel triggered or anxious when you're crossing the street or when you're on the road, maybe. Complex PTSD is different. It's kind of like if you got hit by that car every week for many years. Complex PTSD is when the trauma happens over and over and over again. You can get complex PTSD from living in a warzone, from domestic abuse. Mine comes from a childhood that had a lot of pretty severe abuse and neglect.

**Glynn:** When you say that you are carrying around complex PTSD, how did you get to the point where you able to connect the dots and say, "These things, kind of disparate, maybe they're my personality, maybe they're [exhales] my particular drive, but maybe, they come from something that I need to deal with"?

**Stephanie:** I guess I always thought that I was okay, because it gave me all of the success that I had in life. It gave me your respect and admiration, right?

**Glynn:** Yeah. You had that.

**Stephanie:** That was my trauma at work. My trauma would keep me on a deadline. I never missed a deadline once when I was at Snap Judgment. Why? Because I was so afraid in retrospect of the punishment that would come if I didn't meet that deadline.

**Glynn:** The punishment, what did you imagine would happen if a deadline got missed?

**Stephanie:** I don't think it was super conscious like that, like I expected that you would beat me up. When you grew up in a household-- my mom would force me to write journals when I was six years old. If I messed up there and there at six years old, I would get beaten for it. I think I had just come to correlate making mistakes with danger. I thought it would be dangerous somehow if I missed that deadline.

**Glynn:** Oh, Steph. [sighs]

**Stephanie:** Your question, which was, "When did I realize it was a problem?" I realized it was a problem in 2017 when I found that I could no longer work. I could no longer cover everything up with working, because I was at a point where I was so burnt out, so on edge, so afraid all the time that I couldn't produce anymore. And then, I was diagnosed with complex PTSD. Then, I was like, "Oh." What I've been going through for years was serious. It was something I really needed to get help for. It wasn't just the thing that was going to keep me being successful.

**Glynn:** Steph, the book is called, *What My Bones Know*. In the book, you wrote a little bit about Mimi's story. You're writing a section about the secret keeping that happens oftentimes in Asian American families, and said the fact that Mimi didn't know anything about their mom's childhood, that that was not particularly unique. Can you expound on that a little bit?

**Stephanie:** Yeah, for sure. I went back to San Jose, California, my hometown. So many languages spoken there, so many different Asians in my high school. I just learned that so few of us actually knew details about these conflicts that our parents had survived, like the Korean War, the Vietnam War. Or for me, nobody ever told me about the Malayan Emergency, which was a war template for the Vietnam War, where Chinese communists hid out in the jungle and tried to overthrow the British government. In order to understand why our parents were the way they were, I felt we needed to go back to figure out how intergenerational trauma had affected our parents and how it was currently affecting us.

**Glynn:** Wow. You wrote as well that trauma can be passed on genetically. I wondered, what do you mean by that?

**Stephanie:** It's kind of surprising. We've recently realized that experiencing trauma can actually change your epigenome, which is sort of this layer on top of your DNA that translates which genes in your DNA get read and which don't. For example, mice, who are exposed to the scent of cherry blossoms and shocked, their children and their grandchildren will also be anxious if they are exposed to the scent of cherry blossoms, even if they were never shocked while smelling cherry blossoms. So, some of our mental health issues, as you might call them, might not just be from our childhoods, might not just be us or our fault. They're passed down from conflicts of generations past.

**Glynn:** Wow. Stephanie, your book is called *What My Bones Know*. What do your bones know?

**Stephanie:** Well, my grandfather spent years in prison from the British government. So, my bones know something about what it's like to survive prison. My bones know something about what it's like to survive war, to survive starvation, and how to be resourceful, and wily and make things happen, regardless of what opportunities you have. My bones know probably a lot of things to be afraid of, but they also know how to be creative and survive, I guess.

**Glynn:** I know that as a storyteller, you often have to stick your neck out. I know, for me, as a storyteller that when I recoil from telling the actual truth, that is oftentimes the best story.

**Stephanie:** Hmm. Vulnerability is really important, and people really see vulnerability when you're not just boasting about what you've accomplished, but you're talking about deep moments of shame and failure, because lots of people are going through that. Everyone goes through tremendous failure and feeling like they can't go on. I wrote this book because when I was first diagnosed, I thought, "I need a story. I need somebody to tell me that I can be okay," because I was like, "I'm toxic. I can't survive. I can't go on. I should just not exist." I want somebody to tell me that I can exist. So, I wrote this story to show that you can experience all this pain and deep shame and loneliness, and you can crawl out of it. It's possible. I wanted to give people some hope with that.

**Glynn:** Thank you, Stephanie. I know that this book is going to really touch a lot of people, [chuckles] for real, Steph. We're super proud of you.

**Stephanie:** No, this is definitely a trip. An interesting loop that we are closing with me doing this story with you guys.

**Glynn:** We should be moving into the new Snap Judgment's studios. In fact, maybe you can come and get a casserole with us.

**Stephanie:** Oh, that'd be fun.

**Glynn:** That'd be great if you're around, we love--[chuckles]

**Stephanie:** For sure.

**Glynn:** With the new people that can meet the original, the original Snapper.

**Stephanie:** Keep me in the loop.

**Glynn:** All right. Thanks a lot, Steph.

**Stephanie:** All right, I'll put this in the Dropbox.

[electro music]

**Glynn:** Stephanie Foo, one of the original producers of Snap Judgment, just wrote a memoir about intergenerational immigrant trauma and her own complex PTSD as she tears down her own walls and shares her family's story. It's called *What My Bones Know: A Memoir of Healing from Complex Trauma.* We're going to have a link at *snapjudgment.org.*

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Oh, yes, dear listeners, you have done it again. Thank you for taking this journey with us, and know there is so much more where this came from. Check out Snap Judgment on your podcast device situation, and remember, sharing is caring. Whoever needs to hear, let them know Snapnation forever and ever and ever. And yes, you can rock a Snap Judgment t-shirt, and if I see you, I will scream and holler and give you the biggest hug ever, like just what happened at the movie theater. Respectfully, respectfully. They are available right now at *snapjudgment.org*.

Snap is brought to you by the team that was tucked into bed every night with a glass of warm milk. Except for the uber producer, Mark Ristich, he's lactose intolerant. Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Regina Bediako, Davey Kim, Bo Walsh, David Exumé, and Annie Nguyen.

Now this, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could realize that not only is it not your fault, it's not their fault either. And you would still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.