[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Okay, so I used to work for a big corporate accounting firm. I had two bosses. For the purposes of this story, I'm going to call them Gilligan and the Skipper, because we call them Gilligan and the Skipper. And yes, they both perfectly looked like, acted like, bantered like exactly like their namesakes. It was uncanny. But make no mistake, the Skipper was the skipper. The captain, Ace God, man in charge. And Gilligan had the same boss man title, but everyone knew Gilligan was really just a Skipper's little buddy. That's how it worked. It did work. They were the best of friends from way back. Finished each other sentences, spoke in a babble only they understood.

Until one day, no one knows why or what happened backstage, but one day, they just stopped talking. Closed doors, no little buddy, no finished sentences. The workplace was in an accounting uproar. In the middle of the rumors and deceit, Gilligan calls me into his office, and he says, all casual like, "Hey, you know, I think it's about time you moved on to some bigger projects. I want you to start helping on the Clemson file." The big money file. [scoffs] Here we go. "Thanks, but the Skipper, he told me under no circumstances was I ever to touch the Clemson file." "Well, I think the Skipper might be going up things the wrong way, don't you?" Even I'm not that stupid, Gilligan's trying to stage a coup, and he wants me to put my neck on the line. I don't know what to do, because he's kind of my boss, but Gilligan can't run this ship. He needs a Skipper to give him orders. Put Gilligan in charge, and the minnow would be lost. The minnow would be lost. I tell him I'll get back to him right away.

[door open and shuts]

Of course, Skipper, he sees me coming out of Gilligan's office and his eyes narrow. Lord have mercy. Troubles about to go down, so I'm like, "Hey, Skipper. Gilligan just told me I need to be more like you." "Gilligan said that?" "Yep. Said if I started acting more like Skipper, he'd put me on the Clemson file, but only if you approve. He said nothing happens around here without your say-so." And the Skipper nods slowly. The guy just dropped some mad wisdom. And a couple minutes later, there I see the Skipper and Gilligan joking around like old times, unpleasantness forgotten. And yes, I took full credit. I'm a uniter, not a divider. End of the day, they call me, the both of them, the friendly banter ceases, gets all formal, they say that my repeated and calculated interest in the Clemson file indicates that I'm not really a team player. Really? Really? Really?

[upbeat music]

Today, on Snap Judgment, we proudly present The Fall Guy. Amazing stories from real people caught between a rock and another rock. My name is Glynn Washington. I'm about to take you on a three-hour tour, because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now then, imagine for a moment, if over the next year, hundreds of motley, poorly garbed angry men from the most isolated and remote corners, just walked into the cities across America, with guns and heavy explosives to announce that they were in charge. That, according to our next storyteller, is what it was like living in Kabul, Afghanistan, when the Taliban took over. Qais Akbar Omar says it was a bad movie come to life.

[electronic music]

**Qais:** At the beginning, I was very scared because you see these people that you have never seen before in your life. Tall, broad shouldered, mostly long hair, big beard. And they always put kohl in their eyes. Just imagine all of that. I think the best way for people to see that image is as if they walked out of the Bible. That kind of characters coming to Kabul, in a place where people used to dress up in suit and tie and go to schools and go to work every day. And now these people are ruling the county, so you, of course, you get scared.

**Anna:** Qais was 15 years old. He and his family had fled their home and moved into the rooms of an old mud brick fort in Kabul. The place was overgrown with vines and tree roots, and Qais' family settled into a few rooms in the corner of the fort. Qais would go exploring the streets, just a lonely kid looking for something to do. And one day he ran into Zeki.

**Qais:** Zeki was one of my best friends. I first met him when I first went to school in the first grade and we sat actually together on the same bench. I said, "Zeki, what are you doing here?" And I said, "We're living here." And he said, "We're living right next to you." He sometimes jumped over the wall into the garden. Sometimes, we watched movies because during Taliban times, those things are forbidden, so and he had a large collection of movies that he imported from Pakistan.

**Anna:** They spent most of their time dodging the Taliban, and their new neighborhood was thick with newly emboldened Taliban fighters. There was one particularly broad-shouldered Talib who liked to post up in the middle of the roundabout. His name was Mullah Ghafar.

**Qais:** And Mullah Ghafar always stood in the middle of the roundabout. He was extremely intimidating from far away. You just look at him, tall guy, he had a whip his hand. Basically, a big long electric cable and he make a knot at both ends. So, whenever he hits someone that knot will hit you on the back. He was that kind of guy with fierce eyes because he put a lot of kohl in his eyes.

**Anna:** What's kohl?

**Qais:** Kohl is like the eye blackener.

**Anna:** Did most people in the neighborhood know Mullah Ghafar?

**Qais:** Oh, yeah, because he always stood in the middle of the road like a pillar, and everyone knew that he was Mullah Ghafar.

**Anna:** To be clear, Qais explained that Mullah Ghafar wasn't actually a mullah. He just called himself that because he liked it.

**Qais:** Basically, his job was to monitor that all women were wearing burqa or some kind of a big scarf that from head to toe, they were covered.

**Anna:** So, it was one terrifying hot evening after prayers when Mullah Ghafar tapped Zeki on the shoulder and ordered the young boy to follow him. He led to Zeki through town to a silent empty cemetery. And there, he made a strange request. Zeki ran into Qais' house to tell him all about it.

**Qais:** He was laughing before even he started. And then, he said, "An amazing thing happened." And then, he told me the whole story of how Mullah Ghafar after the prayers, pulled Zeki key out of the crowd and tried to tell him that how much he was in love, and Zeki had to tell him how to find a solution for his love.

**Anna:** So, he had told Zeki, "I'm in love with a girl, I need your help?"

**Qais:** Yeah. He basically was asking how to behave around a city girl.

**Anna:** The girl's name was Sheila. She lived in the house next door to Mullah Ghafar's.

**Qais:** And Mullah Ghafar saw her, I think, for the first time from the second or third floor of the house next door, either washing dishes, clothes, sweeping the floor, cleaning the courtyard, all of that stuff. So, he fell in love with her from up there, just watching her down there working all the time. Zeki came to me and said, "What should we do? What should we do about this thing?" And I said, "I have no clue."

**Anna:** They had two problems. One, they had to protect Sheila. She was a friend of both of their families.

**Qais:** Because I just imagined one of my sisters being married to a Taliban and having that kind of horrible life. We needed to protect her because she was like a sister to us.

**Anna:** But the second problem was, they couldn't anger or enrage Mullah Ghafar, both for their own safety and for Sheila's. They couldn't just say, "Stay the hell away from our friend."

**Qais:** If we told him, he probably would do something stupid to us, either beat us or imprison us or marry her by force or something.

**Anna:** Could he have forced her to be his wife?

**Qais:** Absolutely, yeah, because that happened all the time. At any moment, he could just walk into her house and marry her by force. We brainstormed each other and talked about it for hours until we came to idea of that maybe we should make him our friend first so that he relaxed around us. And then, we slowly, slowly reveal everything about how he will not be able to even get any close to her if he wants to do everything the normal way. That's when we start plotting, like, "Okay, how we're going to go and protect this girl, and also bring Mullah Ghafar into light? Okay, you can do this, but we know that it's going to take a long time." And all we had was time.

**Anna:** Am I correct that this seems like a very dangerous experiment you've set up?

**Qais:** Exactly, yeah. Well, the thing is, at the same time, we knew that we were kind of playing with fire, because if anything went wrong, we have to be so cautious.

**Anna:** And was it like he could turn on you at any minute?

**Qais:** Who? Mullah Ghafar? Of course. Any mistake could end your life, and that means either they will put you in prison, and psychologically that destroys you for the rest of your life. Or, he could just shoot you, literally just shoot you. And that's the end of it, and no one will care.

**Anna:** And so very cautiously, the two boys began their extremist makeover project.

**Qais:** One of the first things we actually asked him was, "Well, for the starters, you don't see a lot of city boys walking around with long hair like yours, and wearing a big turban, and wearing such a long shalwar kameez and so baggy." He said, "Well, but Prophet Muhammad used to wear his hair very long." I said, "Well, yeah, maybe. But that was, I think, about some hundred years ago, and now things have changed." And he says, "What do you mean? What should I do?" We said, "Well, for starters, maybe you can just cut your hair a little short." "No, I'm not going to do that."

**Anna:** When you make each of these suggestions, are you scared?

**Qais:** My hands would be shaking, my hands would be sweating. That's why we always start our sentences with "maybe," "Maybe you don't wear a turban." He said, "How do you dare tell me not wearing a turban?" I said, "Well, I'm not saying that. This is how city girls think because the men in turban women don't look attractive to them."

**Anna:** So, Mullah Ghafar agreed to trim his beard. They took him to a tailor and got him a smarter, less austere shalwar kameez. He eased up on the dark kohl around his eyes. They took him to a barber.

**Qais:** He actually liked it. For example, when we cut his hair short, and in the barber shop, he just stood there, and combing his hair right, and then left and then backward. When you're playing with a doll, so I think he was like our doll, and playing with him, even the dangerous one, like a bomb inside it.

**Anna:** As he kind of transformed, did you start to like him more?

**Qais:** Actually, we did, because he was slowly changing. He was more listening to us. So, I mean, come on. You would even like someone like that, that he is in charge. He can do anything to you, and yet, he's listening to you.

**Anna:** They developed a little routine together. Qais and Zeki and Mullah Ghafar would work out together, and then talk about women and sometimes religion. And Mullah Ghafar started to do little favors for the boys. He would bring them cassette tapes he had confiscated from the cars at the roundabout. They would ask him to cut in front of the line at the bakery for them if they were in a hurry.

**Qais:** And then slowly, slowly, we brought up these other issues and saying, "Hey, Mullah Ghafar, when you stand on the roundabout, if you come across a little soft, it would be nicer."

**Anna:** But Zeki and Qais lived in fear of how their little experiment would end. If and when Mullah Ghafar asked for an introduction to Sheila, the boys would be in enormous trouble. The families together had made plans for Sheila to escape if Mullah Ghafar ever came knocking.

**Qais:** We're kind of scared, like, "Okay, we made all of these things happen. And now, at the end, he probably will send either Zeki's family or my family to go to this girl's house as a suitor to ask for her hand." So, we were actually dreading that moment, like, "Okay, what should we do? We have to just slowly show him a few more things and make him to change his mind in a way that he comes and tell us that this is not the right thing to do." We had to basically insert ideas in his head.

**Anna:** Did you ever straight up bring up with him the concept of women's rights?

**Qais:** No, because you have to be careful about that. We probably, I think, hinted those issues. Like, "Hey, Mullah Ghafar, she has a complex mind. She wants to know all these things. She is very advanced." He said, "Too much education sharpens a woman's mind, and that's not good for a woman. A woman needs to be meek and tame." Then, I said, "Well, she's not that kind of woman. You have to understand." These things, we will always bring these issues and throw him in the air for him. Our job was to just throw as much information as we could and compare the two worlds, and then let him do the rest of the imagination.

**Anna:** They found out about Mullah Ghafar's life. He was from a very poor, very remote area of Helmand. He'd never seen electricity before he came to Kabul. He never gone to school of any kind. So, one day, they decided to show him a movie.

Were you nervous about this plan?

**Qais:** Oh, yeah, we were very nervous. We were not sure what exactly will be his reaction.

**Anna:** They wheeled Zeki's black and white TV into his gym, and cued up *Rambo 3* in the VHS. It's the one where Rambo helps the Mujahideen rebels fight the Soviets in Afghanistan.

**Qais:** We sat. We watched the whole movie. And each time, he would just look at us so strange, like, "Okay, what the hell is happening?" Every time he looked at it and said, "How these people can fit in this box," and I said, "We'll explain the whole thing later." And then, when the movie was over, he just turned to us and said, "I like him very, very much. He killed so many Russians."

**Anna:** He was ready to meet Rambo. Mullah Ghafar thought the movie was real. He wanted to find all the bad guys from the story and kill them.

**Qais:** And then, we explained the whole concept of movie for him. And when we told him who Rambo was, Sylvester Stallone, and why. It was as seeing a piece of ice slowly melting under the hot sun. The guy was just so disappointed, like, "What? How that can be even possible that this thing is all fake, and everything is fake, and nothing is true?" And then, we just didn't know what to expect. He just sat in a corner for 5, 10 minutes in total silence and didn't say anything. And he said, "Why everything has to change so much?". It was as if his whole world turned upside down.

**Anna:** He had been hanging out with city boys listening to their music, talking about worldly ideas.

**Qais:** I think the movie was the last thing to say that he was seeing that, "Okay, life is way, way, way, way, way, way advanced than what we are having in the countryside." Then after the movie, when we watched the movie, he even said that that the best way for me is to go back to Helmand, bring my two younger brothers here and show them what is out here. And the best thing is education, and to have a good education and have a life that I will never be able to have. And then, we asked him what he's going to do about this woman, Sheila, that he fell in love. And he said, "I will never be able to get Sheila because I'm fooling myself." He saw the side that he was basically brainwashed and it's like, okay, brutality and being harsh to people is not the right way to live.

**Anna:** This was the place you had been leading him the whole time?

**Qais:** We were hoping to get him to this place. Yes, that was the whole idea.

**Anna:** Did you guys look at each other like, "We made it"?

**Qais:** Well, we kind of, because we had to be discreet about all that. But, yeah, we were actually very, very happy. So, when that day he walked out of the room, from Zeki's house, we did not high five each other, but that was the feeling that we had like, "Okay, we made it." At the same time, we are sad, like, "Okay, we manipulated the whole situation," but you actually feel sorry for a guy that you see. Look. he was this person who stood at the roundabout with those fear eyes covered with kohl, long beard, long hair, big turban, baggy shalwar kameez and with a whip or a stick in his hand and ordering people to go this way and that way, and now he doesn't even know how to look in front of the feet and he stumbles and you kind of feel sorry. You feel sorry, like, "Okay, what did I do?"

Two weeks, three weeks, we saw him on the on the roundabout doing his job. One day, he disappeared and we never saw him again. Well, every now and again, when we went to bakery story or anything, he always as a habit, you just turn your head around to see that if he's still standing on the roundabout. When he was not there, we kind of missed him in a way. Yeah. Then, the new guy came and took over him. That new guy was exactly how Mullah Ghafar was a few months earlier.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Qais Akbar Omar, for sharing your story with Snap. Check out our website, *snapjudgment.org,* where you will find a link to Qais' truly fantastic book, *A* *Fort of Nine Towers.* The original sound design for that story was by Renzo Gorrio, it was produced by Anna Sussman.

When Snap Judgment returns, the original Fall Guy, what to do when the bully comes knocking, and Snap explores life after death for real. Snap judgment, The Fall Guy episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Fall Guy episode. Today, we're talking with people caught between a rock and another rock. When I was a kid, growing up in rural Michigan, we'll wait for the pond to freeze over every winter to test the ice for proper thickness, tease and tease this kid, Joey, tell him that we can walk in the middle of the lake. Go up there and jump up and down. Come on, Joey. Come on, get out here, Joe. Come on. If he did it without falling in, we're good to go. Peter Aguero, he knows what it's like to be Joey. Now, this story does contain explicit language. Sensitive listeners are advised.

**Peter:** When I was 13 years old, Nellie's Pond froze for the first time since my mom was a little girl, and it's a Saturday afternoon and I'm putting on my jacket and my hat and I'm getting ready to get out of the house. In the living room, my mother's crimping my sister's hair because it's 1990 and that's what you do. She's of the opinion that my sister's hair is "a rat's nest." And my sister's rebuttal is quote, "I hate you." My dad's laying on the floor on the side, chain smoking Marlboro Reds, watching college football. One of the routines was every Saturday night around dinnertime, there's a Saturday night fight. Somebody would say something, which would remind somebody of something else and then somebody would explode and leave the table and two people were crying. Somebody would have to do the dishes every week. So, Saturday afternoon was always kind of the undercard getting ready for that fight, and I just wanted to get out of the house. I leave my family and go to the garage and get my bike and ride a couple minutes over to Nellie’s Pond.

[somber music]

I push my bike through the little sliver of woods and I go out onto the ice. Nellie’s Pond is about the size of two football fields, and in the middle, there's a bunch of kids. They had cleared off the snow and they were playing ice hockey. I never played hockey when I was a kid. There's too much equipment. All I could afford was a stick. But I didn't have to play, I could just ride my bike around the perimeter of the game. So, that's what I'm doing. I'm listening to the crunch of my fat bicycle tires on that lacy scrim of snow that forms just above the surface of the ice, and I stopped over on the side and I'm looking up through the denuded branches of a tree, and it's beautiful.

[kids cheering]

Just then, I hear laughter, and my hat's pulled from my head and it's thrown up in the tree in front of me. It's my favorite hat. It's a green and grey Philadelphia Eagles knit hat with a pom-pom on top. I hear laughter and I look behind me and there's Eric.

[somber music]

Eric's got a big pumpkin head, and his hair's too blonde. You know those kids' hair is just too blonde? That's Eric. He's a perfect henchman. I turn around and I see his boss, Mike Dawes. Mike's got a flattop haircut and these porcine eyes and braces, he looks like a [bleep] lawnmower and he's got his hands clamped on my hands on the handlebars. And he's yelling in my face, he wants to fight. "Come on, pussy. Where's your hat? It's up in the tree. What are you going to do? I'm going to kick your ass." He's screaming at me. Now, Mike's a year older than me. He's big, stocky kid. And I'm 13, I'm almost 6 feet tall but I haven't really grown into my size yet. And he's trying to get me to fight. "Come on, bleep. What are you going to do? [bleep]" And the hockey game stops, and the kids are all watching. The three or four dads in the corner that are drinking coffee are looking too. And I'm in the middle, on the spotlight I didn't even ask for.

I never like to fight, and I don’t know what I did this kid. I don’t know what he's looking for. But he's just screaming in my face, "Come on, what are you going to do?" And I just sit there and I just take it. I stare off in the middle distance and wait for it to be over. I guess after a minute or two, he gets what he was looking for or he didn't get what he was looking for. He kicks my bike tire and walks away, and he says one more time, "Nice hat." Then, he's gone. The hockey game starts again and the three or four dads in the corner drinking coffee and started watching the game, except for one of them. He's looking at me, and I can see him when he sips his coffee, I think he's thinking, "I'm glad that's not my kid."

[suspenseful music]

Well, I leave my hat for dead, and I turn around and push my bike to the little sliver of woods, and I ride a couple minutes back home. I put my bike in the garage and I walk past my family, and I go upstairs and I turn off my bedroom lights and I lay on the bed and put a pillow over my face because I don’t want to talk to anybody. I'm lying there and I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. They're big. It's my dad.

My dad grew up in Northeast Philly. He was a tough guy. He always reminded me of that. He always wanted me to be a tough guy, and I knew I never measured up because I never had. A few years before, I won to dance contest, and I was excited about it, instead of congratulating me, he called me a sissy. He's going to have a field day with this one.

He walks into my room, and I feel his big body sit on the foot of my bed. He says, "What's matter, pal?" From under the pillow, I say, "Nothing." And he lifts up the pillow, he says, "What's the matter, pal?" And then, I put it back down and I say, "Nothing." He takes the pillow, he throws it across the room says, "What's the matter, pal?" I tell him, I say, "Mike Dawes." He nods his head, and he says, "Yeah, that kid is a prick." I said, "Yeah, I know." And I tell him the story of what happened. He says, "Okay," and he clicks his finger, he says, "Come with me." I follow him to the phone. It's a rotary phone. And he picks up D for Dawes and dials six of the numbers and I'm thinking, "Okay, he's going to call Mike's dad and tell Mike's dad to tell Mike to stop bothering me. That's good." But then, he dials a seventh number in his finger's right there on that seventh number, and he hands me the receiver. And he says, "You're going to call him and you're going to tell him you're going to fight him tomorrow at 3 o'clock." And he let's go of the number, and the rotary dial seats back in. And then, it's ringing. And all I want to do with this phone ringing in my ears is run away. But my dad's eight feet tall and 800 pounds to me, he is the biggest man in the world and I can't get around him.

A woman answers the phone. I say, "Hi. Can I talk to Mike?" She says, "Who is this?" I say, "Tell him it's Pete." She says, "Okay." And I hear Mike come to the phone. He says, "What do you want [bleep]?" I say, "Hey, Mike. I want to fight you tomorrow, Nellie’s Pond at 3 o'clock." I see my dad nod his head, and Mike says, "Okay, I'll kick your ass tomorrow." I say, "Okay, thanks, Mike," and I hang up the phone. My dad crosses his arms, nods his head one more time, and takes me out to the garage. And that's when my dad starts to show me how to fight.

My dad didn't understand the kind of son that he had. The kind of son that he had right there, make things with construction paper, go down by the river and read a book. But by him show me how to fight, I could tell that he was trying to turn me into the son that he could understand. The one that wasn't a constant disappointment, wanted the kind of kid that he knew that he knew. So, I went along with it. He holds up his hands and he says, "Okay, your right hand, you're going to stand like this, and you're going to jab with your left to get space. And then when you can, you're going to throw your strong right." And he shows me how to make my fist correctly. He shows me how to stand, use my weight behind the punches. I feel my fists, hitting his hands, like meat on meat, and I'm believing in myself, like maybe this is going to work out, and I feel strong. He pats me on the back, he says, "You're going to do fine, son," and I believe it. "I'm going to do fine."

We go inside, and during dinner, my sister says something to my mama something, she says something that makes my dad explode and he leaves the table. My sister starts to cry. I have to do the dishes. Pretty good Saturday night fight all things considered.

That night, I have a hard time getting asleep. I'm nervous because I'm 13 years old, and the next day, I got a scheduled fight like I'm George Foreman. I eventually drift off and the next morning I wake up and I get my second favorite hat. It's just red. My dad's laying on the floor, chain smoking Marlboro Reds, and watching NFL football. My mom's combing out my sister's hair. It's a "a rat's nest," "I hate you." It's time for me to go.

I pushed my bike through that little sliver of woods and I go out to the ice and it's empty. All the kids are somewhere else. I have the pond onto myself, and I ride right down to the middle. And it's 2:50, and I'm straddling my bike all by myself. It's 2:55 and 2:57, 2:59. I'm just standing there and I'm looking up at the sky. It's one of those slate gray winter skies, that looks like it's about two feet above your head.

Three o'clock, all alone, it's just me and the sky. At 3:05, I see a rustle in the bushes across the way. I start up, and nothing. It must be a dog or a squirrel or something. At 3:10, I put my bike down, I start to bounce around on the balls of my feet. And I'm looking all over the place, waiting for this kid to walk onto the ice. 3:15, 3:25. 3:27, I go get a branch from a deadfall. And I start to throw it up on my hat, and on the fourth try, it knocks my hat out of the branch and I catch it in my hand, and I put my red hat in my pocket and put my Eagles hat back on. It's 3:39, and I realize he's not showing up.

I get back on my bike. I push it through that little sliver of woods, and I take the long way home. I put my bike in the garage. I walk past my family without even looking at him, and I go upstairs, and I turn off my bedroom light, and I lay on the bed. I put a pillow over my face because I don't want to talk to anybody, and I wait for those footsteps to come up the stairs. And I'm waiting for him to ask me what happened. I don't know what to tell him. I just know that he's going to be disappointed in me. I'm not going to be the son that he wanted. But I never hear those footsteps, and he never comes up, and he never mentions it again.

Years and years later, I'm in The Jug Handle Inn in Maple Shade in New Jersey. I'm drinking beer and eating chicken wings with my dad because that’s what you do when you turn 21. You go to a local bar and you drink beer and eat chicken wings. And we're talking, I'm talking about college, and he's telling me about his life, and we're two strangers sitting there. After a minute, he says, "Hey, you remember that kid? Mike Dawes?" I said, "Ah, that kid's a prick." He says, "Yeah. Hey, you remember when you went to go fight him at Nellie's Pond when you were a kid?" I say, "Yeah, I do remember that." He says, "After you left the house, I went around the long way to the other side of the pond. I hid in the bushes and I stayed there and I watched you stand there alone in the middle of the ice. I knew you were scared, and I saw you standing there anyway. And I was never more proud of you than I was in that moment." I look at him for a second, I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything. And then silently just kind of shake my head. There was a lot of other stuff for him to be proud of. I finished my chicken wing and I take the bone, and I just add it to the pile.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Aguero is a world-renowned storyteller and performer who lives with his wife in New York City. The original score was done by Leon Morimoto. It was produced by Ana Adlerstein and Joe Rosenberg.

[somber music]

First, you must understand there are no accidents. There are mistakes, there are errors, there are miscalculations, but there are no accidents. And this is what I told my father when I promised him I would fly in the sky like a bird. "Be careful," he said, "Be careful." Of course, it's a chance, but there are known knowns, there are known unknowns. Reduce the unknown unknowns and increase the known knowns. This is advancement. This is science. But understand, at some point, one must jump.

And after I had affixed each feather in precisely the right formulation, I tested the frame. Pliant, yes, but light. The straps, some [unintelligible 00:35:47]. The wax, a special concoction of mine own invention, how quickly it hardens, how fast it held each and every stitch. All this, and before the final test, even then I knew triumph, I felt victory. Still, I heard his, "Be careful." He meant be cowardly, be safe, be at home in the study of books and warm tea. Be nothing. No. Will you believe that as I stood on the edge of the great cliff, strapped into my suit of feathers, looked down to the mountainous crag, but I felt no fear?

[wind howling]

It's true. Even as I leapt from my perch wings outstretched, I knew the air would catch me and she did, and I flew like a God. [echoes] The path of a condor, big sweeping arcs. The first man to see the valley beneath and that was not enough. I beat my wings faster. I would taste the clouds that smelled of bread and morning. And when my first feather fell from the suit, I laughed. Fate about to rob me, but I knew of her treachery. I flew on, looked down and saw tiny dots. Tiny dots with faces pointed upward. I knew father stood with them. I stretched my wings, "Look. Look. See." Another feather fell, and another. I saw the wax blistering, bubbling. I knew that I would have my taste of sky higher, more feathers ripped from every stroke. My suit, once light, grew heavy. Then, as a cloud of alien beauty sailed in front of me, the suit crumpled to dust and sticks. No. I hurtled toward the sea like a comet. The tiny dots growing larger, their faces filled with horror. I see my father, head shaking, "I told you to be careful." In fury, I shout his answer, "Do you not understand? I fly." [echoes]

[upbeat music]

You're listening to Snap Judgment, The Fall Guy episode. When Snap returns, we've got a sign from beyond, when the Fall Guy episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Fall Guy episode. My name is Glynn Washington, and today, we're exploring what happens when you have to take the blame. And that's all well and good, but what if the person who you promised to take the blame for, isn't even there? Susan Kent brings us a story of when her pact was put to the test. Snap Judgment.

[somber music]

**Susan:** My mom was the kind of person who was always on to really creepy, spooky kind of things. She loved looking for ghosts, and we spent a lot of time at cemeteries hanging out. Cece was my mom's best friend. She was very Catholic, and she hated the idea of spirits. It was amazing that mom even got her to play Ouija board. So, as they were playing, mom started making fun of her and was like, "Listen, you better hope I don't die first, because if I do, I am so going to haunt you." And Cece was like, "Barbara, you can't say that. That's awful. Why would you do that to me?" They fought back and forth for a while, and mom eventually made a deal with her saying, "Okay, if I die first, I promise I won't haunt you if you'll promise that you will haunt me if you die first."

I was about eight years old, and I was in my grandmother's kitchen where the phone was. When it rang, my mom went to pick it up. And she said, "Wait a minute. What?" [echoes] And then all of a sudden, she just started screaming and crying and she collapsed in the middle of the floor. My grandmother came running in and I was holding her head, trying to hug her, and my grandmother was just telling her to get up off the floor. And we realized it was Cece. Her best friend, Cece, had a brain tumor. She completely fell apart and it terrified me.

After she came back from the funeral, she's like, "Well, you know Cece is going to be coming back." It was like every night, "Did you hear anything? Have you seen anything? What's going on?" If the dog started barking at something that we couldn't see, we would attribute it to Cece. It's like, "Oh, that's her. Cece's here." And it was so exciting for those first couple of years because we just kept thinking that something really significant was going to happen that was going to prove that it was Cece, and nothing ever really came.

She'd always been kind of the life of the gathering when people would come over to grandma's house. Everybody sits around the kitchen table in the south, and they have cake and drink tea and chat, and mom was always the funniest one. And as she started to give up hope, she seemed to get sadder, and more withdrawn.

About 10 years later, after Cece died, I was 18 and I was at home. I looked up at this crucifix that had hung in Cece's room that mom had had in her room ever since Cece died. When I looked up at the crucifix on the wall, at a 45-degree angle under Jesus' left arm was Cece's name written in green letters. I went running down the hallway towards the kitchen. I dialed my mom who was at work, and when she answered the phone, I was screaming and crying so hard that I couldn't get words out, and she started asking questions like, "Are you okay? Is there somebody in the house? Did you cut yourself? What is going on? Are you okay? What do you need?" Eventually, I got a breath in and just screamed "Cece."

She was like, "What are you talking about Cece?" And I'm like, "Cece, Cece, she's here. She wrote her name on the wall." After she came back that evening, she started going through my desk and my different drawers, pulling out markers and crayons and pens and eyeliners, any sort of thing that was green in any shade. And she started making these little hashmarks next to Cece's name on the wall, trying to find something that matched it, and it became like an inquisition.

[upbeat music]

People heard rumors that we had had this ghost. Kids in the neighborhood actually came over and graffitied and put Cece's name spelled wrong on the back of a shed in our backyard. It became kind of a joke. The idea that nobody believed me, especially my mom, was devastating.

A couple of weeks later, I was in the living room, and I was getting ready to go to bed. And all of a sudden, I hear this screaming and crying. I went running back to find out what was going on. And she was just squatting on the floor, holding this painting that had been on the wall and she held it up. There was a little tag attached to the frame. I realized that my mom had written Cece a note. "Is it you? I hope so. I love you." [echoes] And they saw the word "yes," written in green and at the 45-degree angle like the other writing. I was so excited for her. I started telling her like, "See? It's okay. It is her, and now you can be happy." She cried for a while and eventually got up and hung the painting back up. It was very quickly apparent that she hadn't believed. It was really disappointing to me. I thought she would be excited. We've been looking for Cece for a decade.

Maybe a month after mom found the note behind the picture, I was sitting in the living room with her and my sister. All of a sudden, this frame just jumped off the wall behind her head and hit the floor. And mom was startled and was like, "What was that?" Mom hopped up and she checked it out. There was this frame embroidered piece that she had made for Cece that had been returned to her after Cece died, and the nail was still on the wall. It was still at the right angle for holding a picture. I was grateful to Cece because I thought, "Well, finally she'll believe me and know that it wasn't me. And then it wasn't my sister or anyone else." She made the comment like, "Well, I guess now I know, huh?" But it didn't change anything.

[upbeat music]

We lost contact a lot over the years. Anytime we would talk on the phone, it was just how awful life was for her and how broke she was. And we talked very infrequently at the time she had gotten cancer. Right before she died, one of the last conversations we had, we were talking that she wanted to be cremated, and she didn't want a service and those kinds of things. As we were kind of finishing up the conversation, she looked at me and said, "Well, Susan, you can tell me the truth now about Cece. You know that right?" And I just looked at her and I was like, "You know, mommy, I've been telling you the truth all along." And mom, she just rolled her eyes at me and rolled over in the hospital bed. That was our last coherent conversation.

**Ana:** Do you think that she's going to haunt you?

**Susan:** I hope that she's going to haunt me. When I got back to New York, I wrote a note on the back of a picture in my house, that just says, "I miss you. I hope you're okay." So, I hope that one day, I'll find a word or something there that she's written me, and then I'll know.

**Ana:** What will you know?

**Susan:** I'll know that she knows I was telling the truth the whole time I told her. And I'll know that she's okay wherever she is now.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Thank you so much, Susan, for sharing your story with Snap. Susan Kent is a wonderful writer and performer, and lives in Brooklyn. Go to our website, *snapjudgment.org,* to find out more. The original score for that piece was done by Pat Mesiti Miller. It was produced by Ana Adlerstein.

[upbeat music]

It's about that time, and if you want more Snap medicine, here's my prescription. It's so easy, just subscribe to Snap podcast and get hours of Snap storytelling delivered, Snappers. Better subscribe while you can, *snapjudgment.org.* Facebook Snap Judgment, Twitter Snap Judgment.

Snap was produced by a fearless crew. Please give it up for the uber producer, Mark Gilligan Ristich. The Skipper, Pat Mesiti-Miller. Millionaire, Anna Sussman. Nobody's wife, Julia DeWitt, Davey, the movie star, Kim. The Professor, Joe Rosenberg. Renzo Maryanne Gorrio. Nancy López was already on the island. The people who tricked our castaways this week, Ana Adlerstein, Teo Ducot, Leon Morimoto and Eliza Smith. Jazmín Aguilera, who doesn’t like boats.

And this is nothing news. No way is this the news. In fact, you'd sail to a secret forbidden island, discover a giant gorilla roaming the jungle, capture him, bring him back, only to get a stern note from your landlord to remind you that no pets are allowed. And you would still, not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[upbeat music]