[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** I have a friend who in high school, perhaps as a test of loyalty, he let me in on a family secret with no warnings whatsoever. We're sitting there in their living room playing Pac-Man on the Atari, talking high school kids' stuff. At precisely 05:31 PM, his father, a large, very large, ruddy red-faced man, he strolls into the room carrying a tiny wooden stool and a large sheet of plastic. He nods to us, "Boys," and then he proceeds to first lay down the plastic. Then, he sits on this stool. All the while, he is naked as a jaybird in the springtime. And I don't know what to do. Well, look, I try to keep my eyes on the Pac-Man, but his mother, she comes in smiling as if everything in the world is precisely as it should be. She takes a spray bottle filled with some sort of oil, I'm thinking, I don't know. She sprays this large man down like he just pulled into a car wash. I'm wondering, should I run from this place? She begins rubbing oil into his skin. These firm, practiced, kneading hands while he grunts and nods with satisfaction.

She stops, she walks away, tooodaloo, toodalee. He takes a moment, considers, stands up, rolls up the plastic, picks up the stool, and leaves the room. You have to understand that every single moment of the sequence, it is solid gold. Unscripted, unrehearsed, live action gold. If I breathe even a morsel of this at school, my story will dominate the high school chatter line for weeks. I'll be the gossip hero. I know this. My friend knows this, but he lets me see it anyway. I think it's for that reason that I can't tell. I can never tell anybody.

I recently got to thinking that the best stories to tell are often the stories you can't tell. The hidden stories. The secret stories. So, today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present The 2022 Look Back Special featuring stories you were never supposed to hear.

My name is Glynn Washington. If they ask you how you know, tell them it's because you listen to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat jazz music]

Okay, Snappers, we're going to start off with a story about notes. Passing notes, only not in class. Snap Judgment's Joe Rosenberg has a story.

**Joe:** Avi Steinberg's mugging story takes place a few years ago when, on his way back from a late-night movie in Boston, a man stepped out from behind him and pressed a cold object to Avi's chest.

**Avi:** He told me that he had a gun, but he actually did not have a gun, he had a knife. So, I very rarely took out the money, gave him the money. I thought, "Okay, we're done here."

**Joe:** Except they weren't done, because instead of leaving, the mugger just stood there, not moving.

**Avi:** I'm thinking, "What does this guy want from me? What is happening here?" And then his tone changed. It changed from, like, mugger tone to, like, something else that I could not quite identify. He says to me, "Do you work at the Bay?" I said, "Yeah, I work at the Bay." He said, "Oh, yeah, I think I know you. Are you the book guy?" And I said, "Ugh, God, yeah." Because the Bay is Suffolk County House of Corrections. That's basically Boston County prison, and I'm the librarian of that prison. Finally, he walks away and then he stops and turns around to me and he says, "I still owe you guys two books," and then just runs. It turns out that this guy had taken out books and he never returned them.

**Joe:** Avi was actually the assistant librarian at the prison. He worked the night shift. And he says that when he first started there--

**Avi:** I thought I would definitely be like cool. You know what I mean? Because I was like, I get it. I get that this is all bull [beep] [chuckles] and that these guys, whether guilty or not, whatever, they got some kind of raw deal. So, I figured they would get me right away, I would get them. It would be great. And it wasn't exactly the case. The second I walked into that library space, I saw a rule that was on the door of the library so everyone sees it as they're leaving because it was the rule. It says, "Books are not mailboxes."

**Joe:** Did you know what that meant?

**Avi:** No, I didn't know. I found out very quickly because within the first week, one of the guards came in and I saw that he was looking at the books. I thought, "Oh, guy's looking at the books. That's nice." But then, he started fishing in the books and pulling out papers.

**Joe:** Then, he walked over to Avi and dropped a note on his desk, a message from one prisoner to another.

**Avi:** He was like, "I found this in the book." I'd say, "Oh, that's interesting." Finally, he said, like, "This is something that happens here."

**Joe:** The officer said that these notes were actually a common way for prisoners to exchange illicit information.

**Avi:** You actually are supposed to go through all the books and make sure that there aren't notes being left inside. So, my job ended up being mostly to be the guy who takes letters out of books.

**Joe:** As it turns out, it was a full-time job. It seemed to Avi sometimes like everyone was leaving notes.

**Avi:** I would see people furiously writing letters in the library. They came, wrote the letter, and stuck it in a book. I saw the whole thing just happen in front of me. And then, I would see people casually walking up and down the aisle, just looking at the books. That's not really how you look at books, you know what I mean? I could tell their look, that look that they had on their face when they were looking for a letter because I had the same look on my face when I looked for a letter.

**Joe:** Then Avi realized that the savvier prisoners, in order to avoid being caught, were using case law books.

**Avi:** Because they're really well organized. You could say like the 19th Volume of *The Federal Reporter*, so that's their mailbox. So, they went straight to that book right away. Tons of letters I know got through because occasionally I would intercept a letter and it was clear that there were tons of correspondence beforehand that I had not seen. Whatever system I concocted to find these letters, they concocted a better system to deliver them. But it was also my job to read these letters because we had to find out if something was happening, if there was something of any kind of security importance. That's what the officers were the most interested in. They wanted to hear what was going on. I would have this downtime. Like in the afternoon when the men were locked down, I would have like an hour or so and the library, it'd be really, really quiet and I'd just sit there reading these letters. And these voices would just jump out of me.

**Joe:** Avi says that as a staffer, he'd always had to maintain a certain distance from the inmates. But through these letters, he could start to understand how prison actually worked.

**Avi:** People would say, "Fly me a kite next week." And I was thinking, "What is that?" I realized they were just talking about the letters themselves. They were referring to the letters as a kite. Once I saw that, I started to see it everywhere and I hear it also, people talking about it. That's just what these letters were called. They were called kites. I didn't realize this but most of these letters were written from men to women and from women to men, because this facility had men and women in it. They never shared the same space ever. The women were housed in the prison tower, like 11 stories up, like Rapunzel style. But for a few hours every night, the women would come down to the library. A lot of the letters were romantic, and they were pages long and people really took a lot of time to write them.

**Joe:** But what really surprised Avi was how many of these romances started in the prison, even though most of these couples had never actually met.

**Avi:** Because they could see each other through the windows, and they actually created this language where they could signal to each other through the windows at night. They would have these live action conversations. I could only see them motioning, I couldn't read it. But then, whatever dramas were happening in the windows would filter into the letters.

**Joe:** I was wondering then if we could have you read through some of these.

**Avi:** Okay. This is Mario writing to T-Baby. "My window writing skills suck. So, we must go slow and be patient with each other until we get better. On Wednesday, we have a window date. Post up in your cell window. When I see you, I'm going to click my lights five times and then shape two hearts."

A woman writing to Papa Duck. "One of my celllies just told me you were skywriting her in May. So, know one thing, my friend. I'm on to you, Mr. Loyal. Stay the [beep] out the windows. I know everyone here."

**Joe:** I love that line.

**Avi:** That's a good one. Let's see. Shaheed, "How can you question my fidelity? Like I told you already, you don't understand or comprehend how what we have is very real. It ain't window talk and just something to do."

[intriguing music]

**Avi:** These are people who come to the library. I know everyone really well. Sometimes, I could tell that this was just such BS. Someone was just completely spinning themselves well. It's like a dating profile. Good for them. They're putting out their best foot or whatever. But sometimes, people would just be super honest. There was a couple of letters from this older woman who I knew, I saw her in the library a lot. She was just really lonely. This is a line from a note that she wrote and left in the library. "To whom it may concern, I'm a 36-year-old mother, grandmother, and addict. The latter I'm not proud of."

**Joe:** Who is she writing to?

**Avi:** Anyone. She was just looking to have a pen pal. It's such a vulnerable position to put out a letter to nobody in particular and then to bear your soul. It takes a lot to do that. But in the end of the day, I didn't let those go through. That was just kind of sad because I was moved by that, but I guess not moved enough.

**Joe:** How does it feel then when these people are yearning to communicate and you're the guy who's like foiling them at the last second and you're not only foiling them but you're getting to know the content of the message and the recipient isn't?

**Avi:** Yeah, it's terrible. Tampering with people's mail is a crime. So, it felt like I was committing a crime, like I was doing something really wrong. But if I let them through, then I'm starting to compromise my authority, which was so shaky, so shaky from the beginning because when you start bending any kind of rules for someone, they could say, "Not only did you do this thing and now we're friends, so you have to help me out, but I know that you broke the rules and I can get you in trouble for that. So now, you better help me. You don't know how it's going to end." I took special solace in my second job, which was to teach creative writing up in the prison tower and hoping that, I don't know, maybe that would help me feel less bad about the fact that I was destroying their other writings. It was in that class on the very first day that I first met Jessica.

My first impression of her was her just sitting very, very still and very straight and very proud, very good posture with her hands folded in her lap, just looking out the window, just kind of meditating. I had no idea what was going on outside that window, only that her attention was there, not with me. One of the readings I had assigned was a short story by Flannery O'Connor. Jessica suddenly said, "Let me see her." And I was like, "What?" I want to see a picture of Flannery O'Connor." "Okay. Is that important?" "Before I read this, I want to see what she looks like." "All right, fine." So, I rustled it out, I showed her a picture of her, and she looked at her very intently and said, "All right, she's not too pretty. She looks kind of busted up. I trust her."

**Joe:** And Jessica went back to gazing out the window and didn't speak for the rest of the class. After a while, it became clear that that's all Jessica did. No matter what the discussion, no matter how hard Avi tried to engage with her, Jessica would just sit there, her head turned to the right, staring off into nothing.

**Avi:** So, I pretty much said to her, "Listen, you can't just sit there staying out the window." Over the course of next few weeks, she'd basically stopped showing up to the class. I figured, "Fine, she doesn't want to come to the class, so be it." Then one day, probably a couple of weeks later, I was in the library just sorting through some books, and Martha, "the gossip," came into the library to chat with me. She said, "Your friend, Jessica, there's a reason why she doesn't come to your class anymore." "Why?", because I was kind of curious. She said, "Because she can't look out that window." "So what? She can't look out the window. It's not my problem." "No, no, you don't understand. She was coming to your class to look out that window because she wanted to look at her son."

[thoughtful music]

**Glynn:** Who is Jessica's son? Find out when The 2022 Look Back Special continues. Stay tuned.

[somber music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to The 2022 Look Back Special. When last we left, Avi Steinberg was having trouble with one woman in his creative writing class, Jessica. And then, Jessica stopped showing up altogether. Snap Judgment.

**Joe:** You see, the window didn't really look out over nothing. It looked out over the prison yard, the same yard where Jessica's son, Chris, who was also an inmate at the prison, had yard time at the exact same time that Avi taught his creative writing class.

**Avi:** She had abandoned this boy years earlier when he was almost a baby. The first time she saw her son as an adult was when he came into the yard. This is what was going on in my class. She wasn't just checked out. She was checking in her son. I don't know whether he knew that she was there. I took the elevator up to the 11th floor where the women were housed. She was just in the corner, minding her own business, playing a game. I sat down with her, and I said, "Listen, I know why you look out the window." She looked at me like, "What do you know?" "Look, I know that you're you were looking at your son, so I want you to come back to the class."

**Joe:** He had only one request, participate a little bit more, just enough to keep up appearances. He'd let her look out the window as much as she wanted.

**Avi:** Then, of course, I sighed and said, "Please don't tell anyone that I'm making this deal, because then everyone's going to want to make deals with me. But I want to help you out here, okay?" She looked at me like, "All right, I'll come to your class. Let's do this." One day, when the class was over and the other inmates had already left the room, I asked Jessica, "So, what are you seeing?"

**Joe:** Jessica gestured to a group of men playing basketball down below. She pointed one out, Chris. From 11 stories up, it was hard for Avi to make out the details, but he seemed happy, healthy, lost in the game.

**Avi:** She had a whole take on him. When she was watching him out the window, she was really studying him and trying to understand what kind of guy he was and how it matched with the little boy that she remembered from all those years ago. The little boy was a very happy boy and very active, and she still saw that, but it gave her some sense of continuity or some sense of, I don't know, something. She told me this incredible dream that she had.

**Joe:** In her dream, she would see Chris on the court, only this time, he was alone.

**Avi:** It was this beautiful dance of him just skating around and shooting the hoops in his very graceful way. She just imagined him breathing, and after many years remembered, the dreams that she had when she was pregnant with him, what it was like to have another breath inside of you. She would go to sleep hoping that she would have this dream.

**Joe:** After that, Jessica started coming down to the library and confiding in Avi more and more.

**Avi:** She told me about the time that she abandoned him. This was after months and months of being seriously addicted and estranged from her family. She just felt like, "I cannot raise this child." She had taken him to a playground that day so he'd be really tired. She got on a train to go to the opposite side of town to a rich neighborhood so she would leave him in a place where there was money and there'd be more opportunity for him. She went into a church, and she left a note that said, "He's a good boy. Please give him a good home. God bless." She put this note in his shirt and just left. That was the last time she saw him. The way she put it to me is, "I committed all these crimes. I was always in trouble with the law. But this was the worst thing I'd ever done, and I wasn't even getting into any trouble for it. I'd gotten away with it," and that was killing her.

In the background, I'm hearing the prison guard come down yelling and saying, "It's time to go." I watched her go out with the other inmates in the hallway. Particularly that day, the guards were just really nasty. I'm watching her through the library window. Everyone else was kind of engaged with the officer and yelling at him and trying to whatever, and she was just like not there. She was like invisible. And then, she just disappeared. I'm sure that night she tried to have her dream. I don't know.

**Joe:** Avi found himself hoping that one day he'd find a kite from Jessica to Chris in the library, letting him know that she was there and that she loved him. Chris wasn't much of a library goer. When he did come in, Avi noticed that he wasn't as happy as he seemed from 11 stories up. Then one day, Jessica came to him with more bad news. She was being transferred to another prison. Within a month, she'd be gone.

**Avi:** And I said, "Well, what about Chris?" She said, "What about him?" And it was true. What exactly was I even suggesting? I don't know. Later, before really, when it got closer to her, actually her time to leave, she said to me, "I'd like to write him a letter. Can you deliver it to him?" And of course, I thought, "No."

**Joe:** This was, after all, the opposite of what he was supposed to do. His job was to intercept messages, not pass them along. For all the reasons he talked about earlier, it was just a bad idea.

**Avi:** I just couldn't help but say something at that moment, because in prison, it's very hard to make things good happen. I thought this is something that I can do. I said, "Okay, I will do this. Yes." "I also want to give him a gift." "I can't give him a gift. What is that going to be?" She said the gift was a drawing of her. She wanted to have her portrait drawn, and she wanted her son to have this picture of his mother.

**Joe:** Avi reached out to Chris through a third party, a mutual friend who often came into the library. Only he said Chris wasn't interested in anything his mother had to say.

**Avi:** After, I don't know, maybe a couple of days, a couple of weeks, he said that Chris actually was open to something. When that letter came, I should give it to him, and he would give it to Chris, and he was waiting for it.

**Joe:** Now, all he had to do was set up a space for Jessica to have that portrait drawn.

**Avi:** She came so prepared for that moment. She walked in and she just looked completely different. Her eyebrows were plucked. Her lips and cheeks were rouged. Oh, and she had this flower in her hair made out of construction paper and gum wrappers folded origami style into, like a dahlia flower. At some point, I said, "Maybe you should stare off in the distance, like looking out that window." But this was dismissed as too artsy.

**Joe:** When the portrait was finished, Avi had to admit that Jessica's instinct was spot on. In the drawing, she put her best face forward, smiling for her son.

**Avi:** Just from every single moment onwards, I felt nervous, because Jessica really wanted to fuss over this letter, really get it right. So, I'd say to her, "How's it going with the letter?" "No, I need more time. I need more time." Whenever Chris' friend would come into the library, he would say to me, "Hey, how's it going? Do we have any progress?" I would keep saying to him, "I saw the portrait. It's happening. She's just working on the letter. Yes, yes, it's in the mail." But the fact was, I didn't have the letter in my hand. A few days later, I was at the circulation desk processing books, and Martha, "the gossip" came in. That's where all these stories started and ended. And she said to me, "She's gone. Jessica has left." I had been preparing myself for her leaving for a while. I knew that that was going to come. The fact is that as long as she had the letter, it could still happen. She said, "I want you to know also that Jessica trashed a letter. She ripped it up and threw it into the garbage. And I saw it." That hit me hard, because for me to think that I had raised Chris's hopes, it was just horrible.

**Joe:** What did you do to reach out to Chris? And what did you say to him?

**Avi:** Yeah, not much you can say. I wrote him a really simple note. It said, "I tried, Chris, I'm really sorry." Then, it must have been weeks or, I don't know months later, Martha came in once again to the library, but this time, she was in tears. She told me that Jessica had died. It happened not long after she had gotten out of prison, and she said she had overdosed alone in an abandoned house. Through her tears, Martha said to me, "She was my friend." I said, "I know." She said, "She considered you a friend too," which in prison that's such a radical notion, but it was the truth.

When you're about to leave the prison, you have to just wait in this little area between two doors while they check you out. There are a lot of prison guards and other people's staff around. For some reason that night, the wait was longer than usual, and we're just waiting and waiting, thinking this door is never going to open. At that moment, I started feeling like I was just going to burst into tears in between the prison doors. But I pushed them down and the door opened, and I escaped into the night.

A few weeks later, after all this, I found myself wanting to find a book. It was late at night. I rolled up to the prison, flipped the light on back in the library, went to the poetry section, and then I opened the book up and a note slipped out, a kite. I looked at the note and it said, "Dear Mother, my life is--" And that was it. Nothing else.

**Joe:** Did you even allow yourself to think that this might be something from Chris? Or is that just too outlandish?

**Avi:** It's not too outlandish for me. Someone else who opened it would have had a totally different take on it. One thing I knew about this letter, the only thing I really knew about it, was that it was wedged into a book about Sylvia Plath. Jessica used to come into the library looking for books and never finding what she was looking for. She told me that she'd probably read the back of every book in the library and had never found anything that was interesting for her. Sylvia Plath, she was a big fan of hers. So, everything for me at that moment came together in that unfinished letter.

[engrossing music]

**Glynn:** To learn more, a lot more about Avi's time in the Suffolk County House of Correction, go grab a copy of his memoir. It's called *Running The Books*. It's got some amazing stories. His latest book, *The Lost Book of Mormon*, which was nominated for the Thurber Prize for American Humor, we've got links to both on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

Original sound design for that piece was created by Renzo Gorrio and the story was produced by Joe Rosenberg.

[upbeat music]

Now, don't touch that dial. When we return, brownies. Special brownies. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington, and you're listening to The 2022 Look Back Special. Now, our story comes out of San Francisco, late 80s. It reminds me kind of the times we're in today when higher powers that were slow to respond to the AIDS crisis sweeping through America and everyday folk, they pitched in to do what they could do to help out. Now, this story does mention the use of drugs and contains graphic scenes. Sensitive listeners should be advised. Our hero, Alia, was just in the fourth grade.

Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Alia:** We were going to the cafeteria because we had a special guest.

**Shaina:** The special guest was a cop.

**Alia:** Like a cop cop. There was a moment of wondering if he was there for me or my family, like heart pounding terror. He tried to be chummy with the kids and authoritative at the same time. And then, he tells us that we're going to be spending a lot of time together that semester to learn how to just say no to drugs.

**Shaina:** The program was Drug Awareness Resistance Education or D.A.R.E. It was part of Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign. The idea, to educate kids about the perils of crack, heroin, and marijuana.

**Alia:** The cop would say, like, "What do you say if someone offers you a cigarette? Just say no. What do you say if someone tells you all the kids are doing it? Just say no."

**Shaina:** Every time the cop came, the students would break into groups to basically role play, which was stressful for Alia.

**Alia:** I was always the last kid picked. Always the last kid picked. I was into cat sweatshirts and horse sweatshirts. I know I was weird because other kids treated me like I was weird.

**Shaina:** Alia remembers being assigned to the role of the drug dealer.

**Alia:** We get a printout with the line that we're supposed to say, "Hey, kid, want to try some dope? It'll make you look really cool. Do you want to try some pot?" I'd never seen anything like the deal that was on the paper. I'm sure it was tempting to say, "Look, this isn't how it works."

**Shaina:** But Alia wasn't going to say that.

**Alia:** My mom was a drug dealer.

**Shaina:** Alia knew if anyone found out about her mom's work, her mom could go to prison.

**Alia:** Good friends went to jail.

**Shaina:** If Alia's mom got caught, Alia could end up in foster care.

**Alia:** It was a life-shattering proposition. My entire world would be destroyed if anybody found out. It wasn't just police, it was all authority figures. If a teacher found out what my parents did for a living, they could end up in prison because the teacher could tell a cop. If another child my age found out, they could tell a teacher who could tell a cop, or they could tell their parents who could tell a cop. So, there's nobody who is safe to tell. My mom was really beautiful and warm. She had this great asymmetrical kind of Sheila E. haircut, dyed burgundy, short one side and swept up and then fell over her eye. Part of her attitude was being this outlaw, was being a badass outlaw. That had always been something that she was really proud of. When she did her deals, people would come over to the house and stay and hang out. She was just really good at advice. I always felt like I had this incredibly beautiful world that nobody could see.

**Shaina:** When Alia went home from school, she hung out with her mom in the kitchen.

**Alia:** My mom in the kitchen is a disaster. She burns toast and eggs. She can't really boil water. The only thing that felt really wholesome and warm was making brownies.

**Shaina:** Alia and her mom would make four or five batches at a time.

**Alia:** There would be eggshells and the chocolate would get splattered on the wall and the flour would end up anywhere and we'd just laugh. My first task was pulling out the Saran wrap, ripping it on the edge, and just making a huge sticky pile of Saran wrap squares that the wrappers could then use to wrap the brownies. And then, you sit around the table, and it was something that had always been a ritual going on in the family where my mom and good friends would sit around a table together and wrap. I loved it.

And then, that fantastic, fantastic smell. The smell is something that really sticks with me. There's a particular smell of marijuana, good outdoor grown California marijuana and chocolate cooking together. It's a very, very specific smell. It's like earthy and sweet. It's this really comforting smell, which is funny because it was something that also put us in danger.

**Shaina:** The D.A.R.E. program was just one of Reagan's antidrug initiatives. He had also launched a campaign targeting California growers. As a young kid back in Mendocino, where people grew weed, Alia heard helicopters thundering over the nearby fields.

**Alia:** U-2 spy planes swooping over our house. Tanks would come through the town. There were over hundred agencies involved by the mid-80s, and they were dedicated solely to eradicating growing in California. They would use military equipment, infrared photography, and people would get busted. They would be people that my family knew, who were a part of the community, who were good people, were just mountain hippies. It scares your parents, and it scares their friends. You get ingrained with this idea of who's good and who's bad. And when you're raised with the idea that you're an outlaw, the bad guys are the cops.

**Shaina:** I feel like as an adult, it's hard to keep a secret. But as a kid, it must have been so hard to keep that secret.

**Alia:** A friend of mine was just saying the other night that it's like giving a child a gas can and matches and telling them not to burn the house down. I guess that's true in a way, but I felt-- how can I explain this? I felt so much on my mom's team. She just trusted me.

**Shaina:** Did that feel powerful?

**Alia:** Yes, I think so. It is special to be part of a secret.

**Shaina:** As time went on, Alia got more comfortable with the D.A.R.E. cops.

**Alia:** As I relaxed into the idea of, "Oh, this is a joke. This is a big joke."

**Shaina:** Alia brought her mom D.A.R.E. pens and folders.

**Alia:** And bookmarks. I had a t-shirt at a point, and I think I won it by giving right answers. The D.A.R.E. logo was just "D.A.R.E. To Keep Kids Off Drugs."

**Shaina:** Alia's mom cracked up at Alia's new D.A.R.E. swag.

**Alia:** That's, of course, in the period where D.A.R.E.'s funny, and then the novelty wore off, and it stopped being funny.

**Shaina:** The next year, when Alia moved on to fifth grade, her mom had started making a lot of house calls.

**Alia:** Well, by this point, 1988, people were getting too sick to come out. The cannabis was helpful with nausea, insomnia, pain, and depression and a lot of symptoms that just had no treatment at the time.

**Shaina:** One day, Alia's mom picked her up from school. She had to make a delivery.

**Alia:** We went into the Castro and up this steep side street. It was one of these frilly wedding cake Victorians and had a view over downtown. You could see the Bay Bridge crossing to Oakland. We go to the door, and there was a man standing up on the landing. He greeted us. We start climbing the stairs. He was on either the second or third floor, and it was backlit. It wasn't until we got closer that I saw the condition he was in. He was shirtless and wearing pajamas, and the pajamas were just hanging off his hip bones. He had that really hollowed out look, like he'd been hit with a bowling ball. His chest curved around this hollowness, and you could see every bone. He had this huge lesion where lesions had grown together into the shape of a butterfly. He was so sick, it took my breath away.

He was maybe surprised to see a kid. My mom said, "Don't worry. She's cool." He let us out into a big, airy living room. Over by a bay window was a hospital bed that looked empty to me at first. But as we got closer, what had looked like a tangle of blankets was a person, barely there. I remember looking at his face and seeing the shape of his teeth through his cheek. I remember looking at the needle going into his hand, the top of his hand, and all the bruising around it. What we had was a very sick man taking care of a very sick man, which was not uncommon in those days.

The first guy's name was David. David bends over his lover and he touched his cheek. "Honey, I know you're not feeling good, but I want you to meet a friend of mine. She's brought the magic brownies that I told you about. It'll help you feel better." And his lover just couldn't even talk. He couldn't even talk. As a kid, I knew he was dying. I knew he was about to die. I was really struck by the tenderness between these men. Even then, that was what crushed me.

I walked around while they were doing the transaction, and I remember really clearly seeing a photograph on the mantle of a dark-haired man and a beachy blonde with their arms around each other on the beach. They were tan, muscular, and they had sand on their skin and smiling and young and in love. My mom who had this amazing ability to be upbeat without being abrasive, she was able to make a joke that, "Don't eat too much. They'll have to peel you off the ceiling." David smiled and he laughed. There was just this moment where he looked like the same person. You could see that vitality, the intensity in his eyes. His laugh was rich. It was really hard.

My mom and I went out to the car, and she started crying pretty quickly. I think she was really freaked out about having brought me in. I'm gritting my teeth, "I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine." Of course, I wasn't, because I never forgot that. It wasn't funny anymore. I had always felt like I was hiding this rich world, but now it was a rich and terrible world. When you talk about the burden of a secret, it was much more of a burden to know about the way that people were dying. That was a burden. At the very least, I maintained the secret. That stays the same. But the sadness, the emotion that is underneath it changes. The secret stays the same.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Special thanks to Alia Volz for sharing her story with the Snap. For more about Alia's mom's business selling weed brownies, order her book, *Home Baked*, comes out on 4/20.

The original score for that story was by Doug Stuart. It was produced by Shaina Shealy.

[upbeat music]

What an entire year of storytelling. Are you kidding me? Snapper-dappers, we are grateful that you decided to take this ride with us. If you missed any stops on the Snap bus line, not to worry. The podcast is available for free for you, for your friends, for your enemies, for your mom and them, for peace, for justice, for good times and for bad.

Snap is brought to you by the team that has already left the building and started their yearend celebrations. Except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. He promised to keep the car running for me right outside. Isn't that nice? Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, and Zahra Noorbakhsh.

Please know that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, after your cannabis dispensary working sister comes to spend a few days, you could suddenly break out into cold sweats wondering if you accidentally put the wrong brownies in the kid's lunch box. [gasps] All that, and you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*