[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Snappas, do you know at one point, I got a call from the powers that be saying Snap was canceled. That was a very, very no good, very bad day but I realized that the powers that be didn't own this show. You own this show, Snappas. That's why I'm asking you to support it, right now at a level that makes sense for you *snapjudgment.org*. If you've ever been unable to get out of the car, the kitchen, the office, until you heard the end of the story, please become one of us and support the show that makes it happen, *snapjudgment.org*, because it doesn't happen any other way. You can get Snap stuff, including music, a chance to pitch your story, or a backstage pass to Spooked Live.

If Snap storytelling is in you, if you depend on this show, please stop for just a moment. Stop the show for just a minute and join at a level that makes sense for you. *snapjudgment.org*. I promise you the best sleep ever and a grin on your face when you leap out of bed in the morning. What a deal. *snapjudgment.org*. Thanks.

[upbeat music]

Okay, when I work at home, first, I get a snack. Then, I check sports scores, watch a little *South Park*, tweet, refresh, *nytimes.com*. Text my cousins, take a nap, get another snack, play music videos from the 80s. Start a load of laundry, search UFO sightings. Almost buying stuff on Amazon, post taunts on right wing websites. Edit vacation photos. Look up old girlfriends on Facebook. And then, it's time for lunch. And, of course, I feel bad. No more fooling around. I got to get out of the house, right?

So, I go to a coffee shop. I love coffee shops, even though I don't drink coffee, because there's people there, they're doing things. Used to be driving around, I always wondered who those people were, sitting in coffee shops in the middle of the day. Now, I know. There are people like me in panic mode because we only have a few hours left but if you go to the same coffee shop over and over and over again, people start to know you.

Once they start to know you, they start to get chatty. "Hey, how's it going? Did you hear about what happened down there on Broadway and 14th?" "Yeah, they're building something." "I don't know what it is." "Looks like it's going to rain. Looks like it's not going the rain." That's when I pull my trick. I put on my headphones. I've got a nice pair, they're fat, worth their weight in gold. I stick them on, and pow. I hit my equilibrium point between enough coffee shop visual simulation and the warm, silent cocoon of Master & Dynamic M40 headphones and when people come talking about the weather report or whatever, I just point to the headphones. They nod their understanding, "Oh, he must be listening to something very important."

Now at long last, I can work, I can concentrate. And it's a race. A race against my own neurosis because I've learned that everything I want to do, music, stories, art, plans, for me, it can only come from silence. From turning off everything. The phone, the internet, go to my quiet place, do stuff.

Then, I drive back home. And now it's busy. Kids running around top speed, dog barking, people knocking, chores I'm supposed to do or have done. But after a hard day, I'm trying to sit down and relax. And when the wife asks exactly what do I think I'm doing, I just point out my headphones. But that trick doesn't work so well anymore.

[upbeat music]

Today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present Fortress of Solitude. Amazing stories from that quiet space. My name is Glynn Washington. There'll be plenty of time for silence later on, but right now you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now then, our first story starts off 40 years ago at a time when men were real men, women were real women. And most importantly, superhero toys were real superhero toys. Vanessa Rancaño takes it from here.

[upbeat music]

**Vanessa:** To understand the context of this story, think back 30, 40 years ago, to the age of the all-American action hero. Hippies were out, tough guys were in. So, you had these vigilante enforcers, like Charles Bronson, Chuck Norris, [gunshots] and of course--

**Boy:** It might be a tumor.

**Arnold Schwarzenegger:** It's not a tumor.

[machine gun shooting]

**Vanessa:** But before Arnold, before Norris, before Bronson, there was this guy.

**Narrator:** Now you can play world's greatest investigator with Jay J. Armes, the action figure with interchangeable hands.

**Vanessa:** This is an advertisement for a toy. A Texas PI named Jay J. Armes.

**Narrator:** Using hooks, Jay J slides down, hot on the trail.

**Vanessa:** Only he wasn't an actor or fictional character. No, Jay J. Armes was real. He was an actual person.

**Gary:** He was the world's greatest private detective.

[upbeat music]

**Vanessa:** This is Texas Monthly reporter, Gary Cartwright. And he says that back in the mid-70s, Jay J was a darling of the mainstream media.

**Gary:** Newsweek, The Atlantic. Macmillan was coming out with a book.

**Vanessa:** Where you could read all about his incredible cases.

**Gary:** He had rescued Marlon Brando's son. Daring rescue in Mexico. Started a Mexican jailbreak that later became the Charles Bronson movie, *Breakout*.

**Narrator:** This man is in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Only this man knows why. This woman wants her husband set free. Only this man can do it.Breakout. Rated PG.

**Gary:** But the most amazing part of it.

**Vanessa:** The thing that made Jay J. Armes a real-life action figure.

**Gary:** He didn’t have any hands. His hands had been blown off in a childhood accident, and he just did everything with these hooks. And I thought, "This is really interesting. Let's find out more about this guy."

**Vanessa:** Gary wanted to one up those other magazines to get to know the real Jay J. Armes.

**Gary:** So, I called him, and he said, "Sure, come on down."

**Vanessa:** Gary and a few other journalists went down to El Paso, where Jay J's detective agency had its national headquarters.

[upbeat music]

**Gary:** Jay answered the door, and I just kind of observed the guy. He was fascinating to watch, very composed, very articulate, good sense of humor. Degree from UCLA, from New York University. And you couldn't get your eyes off his hooks.

**Vanessa:** Gary says the hooks didn't seem like a disability at all.

**Gary:** He could do things with his hooks that I can't with my hands. Each had a power of 38 pounds per square inch, which is like four times the power of a human hand. At the base of the hook, there was the muzzle of a. 22 pistol.

**Vanessa:** In other words, it wasn't just a hook. It was a gun. Jay J. Armes had a gun for a hand. Gary Cartwright was staring at a living, breathing superhero.

[intriguing music]

**Gary:** But then, we went to his office, and his office on the outside, it looked like any other, but when you walk in, it's got this strange lighting. Everything is reds and greens, and the first thing you see is this mural on the wall of a man in a trench coat cradling the world in his arms. As I began to look at this painting, I realized, self-portrait. He's given himself blue eyes, and he's holding the world, but he's not holding it with his hooks, he's holding it with his hands.

[intriguing music]

**Vanessa:** While Gary contemplated the painting, Jay was busy showing off a room he called his "crime lab."

**Gary:** He had what he called a debugging device, a tranquilizer gun that's supposed to shoot sleeping gas. Then, he shows us some bullet holes in the wall of his office from one of the assassination attempts.

**Vanessa:** Jay J had explained that there had been 13 separate attempts on his life.

**Gary:** The accumulation of weird things is beginning to weigh on me. I look at one thing, and he's got somebody else to show me.

**Vanessa:** Next up on the tour was Jay J's home, the mansion. Well, more like the grounds around the mansion.

**Gary:** There wasn't any backyard per se. There was this Nairobi Village, he called it, and it's another world.

[birds chirping, insects buzz]

**Gary:** Thatched huts, exotic plants, trails through high walls of bamboo, monkeys running loose.

**Vanessa:** Jay J said that he currently owned 22 different species.

**Gary:** Including a West Texas puma, some miniature Tibetan horses that shrink with each generation, and a 400-pound Siberian tiger. He explains they used to have a pet elephant, but a neighbor killed it with a crossbow.

**Vanessa:** What’s your impression at this point?

**Gary:** Well, I'm overwhelmed. I'm just trying to get through the next few minutes. I don't have time to do anything but wait for the next thing to happen.

**Vanessa:** And the next thing was-- you know what? Let's just have Gary describe it.

**Gary:** We're in the middle of a jungle, and a palm tree rings. [telephone rings] Jay walks over and opens the side of the palm tree. There's a telephone in there. [chuckles]

**Vanessa:** Jay spoke cryptically into the receiver, presumably with one of the 2000 agents he said he had working for him around the country. He had already briefed the reporters on his daring operations in Mexico and Cuba and pointed to a helicopter, one of three he was licensed to fly. He said, on 30 minutes' notice, he could have it fueled and airborne.

**Gary:** He also had told us that he spoke seven languages, including 33 dialects of Chinese. When you'd say, "Jay, how could that be possible? How could you possibly have done that?" He would say, "I read the book and I saw the movie." I don't know what that meant.

**Vanessa:** Back at the house, Gary wandered over to the helicopter while Jay J was busy with the other journalists.

[eccentric music]

**Gary:** Suddenly, I'm taking a closer look at this thing, and the more I looked at it, the more I thought, "My God, wait a minute. Look at it." It's got flat tires. The wheels are buried up to the hubs and dirt. The windows are covered with tape instead of glass. This helicopter hadn't been off the ground in years. This is when I began to think, "There's something really screwy going on here."

**Vanessa:** So much of what Jay J was telling them didn't seem like it could be real.

**Gary:** You're overwhelmed with what is real. This guy with the hooks for hands, with all the animals that he's got, all that was true. So, maybe the rest of it is true. That's when I excused myself and I called another private investigator. I said, "Can you tell me something about him?" He said, "Yeah, I can tell you a lot about him." He says, "The reason you're having trouble tracing Jay Armes, that's not his real name. His real name is Julian Armas." Once I found out his real name and started talking to people, it all became very clear. Everybody [unintelligible 00:13:15] the story and everybody's willing to talk.

**Vanessa:** Julian Armas had been born into a Mexican American family in an impoverished El Paso neighborhood called Isleta. A few years after losing his hands, he left for California. When he came back, claiming he'd been in movies, he was transformed. Julian Armas was now Jay J. Armes.

[eccentric music]

**Gary:** He came back in an old raggedy Cadillac convertible with a dummy telephone mounted to the dashboard. He would pull up beside girls at the drive-in, and he would pretend to be talking to some foreign agent. Everybody had grown up with him and knew him, knew that he had this fantasy life that he lived.

**Vanessa:** That fantasy life seemed to have seeped into every aspect of Jay's personality and profession.

**Gary:** Jay had claimed that he went to UCLA, and they'd never heard of him. He claimed he had 2000 agents around the country. He had none. He had zero.

**Vanessa:** Gary found that the Federal Aviation Association had never issued Jay J a pilot's license. The Academy of Motion Pictures could provide no record of any feature films he claimed to be in.

**Gary:** He had appeared in one episode of *Hawaii Five-0*. He played a heavy called Hookman. People claimed that his voice had been dubbed.

**Vanessa:** Just to be clear, Jay J was a real private eye. That part was true, and he was involved in the rescue of Marlon Brando's son. But his other big cases, the ones in China and Cuba, were impossible to confirm. And worse, Gary says that former clients told him they'd paid for investigations and gotten false reports.

**Gary:** The more people I talked to, the more I thought, not only is Jay not the world's greatest private detective, he's not even the best private detective in El Paso.

**Vanessa:** Did you ever confront him with any of this information you found?

**Gary:** Oh, no, [chuckles] of course not.

**Vanessa:** Well, why wouldn't you?

**Gary:** Why would I? My job was to find out who the real Jay Armes was. Once I did that, I'm feeling a little bit scared, because Jay now knew I was on to him. In El Paso, you could have somebody killed for $50, any cab driver can arrange it, and I'm wanting to get out of there in one piece.

[groovy music]

**Vanessa:** I asked Gary if he had any reservations about exposing Armes, but the way Gary saw it, Jay J had gone out of his way to misrepresent himself to serious journalists whose job was to report the truth. No one had forced him to do that. When Texas Monthly began fact checking Gary's story--

**Gary:** Jay got an injunction to stop publication of the magazine, and we got an injunction lifting his injunction.

**Vanessa:** The article with the headline *Is Jay J. Armes For Real?* was a hit, and it was brutal. Gary ended up poking holes in just about every part of Jay's story. The piece seemed sure to bruise his professional reputation, if not, demolish his career.

**Gary:** I never heard from Jay again. So, that was the end of my association with him.

**Vanessa:** Do you think it had any effect on Jay?

**Gary:** I don't know if it had any effect or not. I didn't call him and say, "How's this affecting your life?" In fact, until you called me and said that you were interested in doing a story on Jay Armes, I hadn't even thought of it about him in years.

**Vanessa:** Gary's article came out 40 years ago. And if you google Jay J. Armes today, it still comes up. But so does the website for Jay's business, The Investigators. He's still around and apparently working.

**Gary:** Have you met him? Have you talked to him?

**Vanessa:** I'm going to go on Friday.

**Gary:** Oh, you are? What, are you going to confront him with all this?

**Vanessa:** Of course, but not as an attack. I just think it's fascinating, all this stuff we talked about. I mean, he's just such a complicated character.

**Gary:** He is a very complicated character. Call me, let me know how it went. I'd be curious how it went.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Yep. When Snap returns, we're going into the belly of the beast. The stunning conclusion when Snap Judgment, The Fortress of Solitude episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Fortress of Solitude episode. When last we left, intrepid producer, Vanessa Rancaño, had only heard about the legend of Jay J. Armes. Well, now she was about to find out for herself.

**Jay's Secretary:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Okay, Vanessa, I'm going to send you up.

**Vanessa:** Jay J's office in El Paso was easy to find. It was the one right underneath a billboard with a shot of Jay J posing with the gun drawn. When I get there, I wait in the lobby underneath a photo of Jay J standing with George W. Bush. Eventually, Jay J's secretary leads me down a long hallway, past a stuffed ostrich and into an elevator.

**Jay's Secretary:** It's going to get more exotic in his office, but I don't want you to worry. Nothing up here is real. Okay? Come on.

**Vanessa:** The door opens, and the first thing I see is a well-dressed man sitting across from me on a white leather couch. He's wearing sunglasses, and he has a magazine clasped between two silver hooks. I'm about to walk up and introduce myself when I hear a voice behind me. The couch guy was a mannequin, and now the real Jay J is headed toward me with his arms open.

**Jay:** You know what? Everybody deserves a hug. World is so apart from everybody now.

**Vanessa:** Jay J is warm, polite. He has an easy sense of humor. He's wearing gold-rimmed wraparound glasses. His office is this enormous oval. His desk is like some kind of 1960s NASA command station. The curved wall behind it is covered with brightly colored graphs. Four clocks tell time across US time zones. There's a row of monitors on the desk from which Jay J can see the entire office.

Did you see us the whole time we were here?

**Jay:** The whole time. We check to see if you had any weapons.

**Vanessa:** How did you check to see if we had weapons?

**Jay:** I have a camera that can zoom in to your body.

**Vanessa:** Is there anything else that you'd-- that’s-that's a whole lot of money.

I just noticed a big stack of cash on Jay J's desk.

**Jay:** Oh, yeah, a client just left. That's about $5,000. That's for a small case.

**Vanessa:** I asked Jay J to take me to his house. It's changed since Gary's visit. The only remnant of the Nairobi Village is a faded sign. The helicopter is long gone, but he still has one white tiger and a chimpanzee. There's a bronze statue of himself outside the front door. Inside, there's a casino Jay J made for his wife. His closet is packed with hundreds of tailored suits. He presses his hand against the wall, and I hear a click.

**Jay:** I just opened a secret door to a secret room.

**Vanessa:** Oh, God. What is this?

**Jay:** This is my saferoom with every type of gun that you can imagine. That's a MAC-10 .45 machine gun. That's an Uzi, a paratrooper's gun, a .22 Magnum, and a shotgun.

**Vanessa:** When we're back at the office, I finally work up the nerve to ask about the mannequin on the couch.

**Jay:** He travels in my limo so that he can be in one part of the country in my limo, and I'll be another part of the country to throw off the people that are against Jay Armes because there's been 15 assassination attempts on my life.

[telephone rings]

**Jay's Secretary:** Mr. Holder, line one.

[telephone rings]

**Jay:** Hello, Mark.

**Mark:** Hello, Mr. Armes. How are you, sir?

**Vanessa:** Mark Holder is a producer. He's working on a TV series about Jay J.

**Jay:** The writers are working on the show?

**Mark:** You couldn't have hotter writers on your hands, that's for sure. We hope to sell to Netflix or to HBO or Showtime or Amazon, one of those places.

**Jay:** That's great, Mark.

**Mark:** Keep up the good work. We're looking for the CNN piece to come out soon.

**Vanessa:** Jay J just had a visit from a CNN film crew.

**Jay:** Thank you, Mark, and I'll be in touch with you.

**Mark:** Sounds good, buddy. I'll talk to you soon.

**Vanessa:** He says he's had other offers from producers, but this new TV series is different.

**Jay:** My story will never be out of my control because my story is controlled by me. All the stories that you see on TV is fiction. This is going to be true.

[el mariachi music]

**Reporter:** This is Jay J. Armes. He's maybe the world's most famous private investigator.

**Jay:** I don't say that-- [voice fades away]

**Vanessa:** The CNN piece came out shortly after I visited Jay J. Watching it, I'm struck by how different his operation looks on TV than it did in person. There's quick cuts of Jay J pushing buttons on his desk command station, and a wide shot of him sitting in front of those big wall charts. What you can't see in the video is that most of those buttons on the desk monitors just do really basic stuff, like turn lights on and off. The big wall diagram, the one labeled The Investigator's chart, is just a list of distances from El Paso to other cities in the region. The clocks on the wall, they don't even tell time correctly. They're all props. Jay J's world is made for TV.

**Jay:** I have more work now than ever.

**Reporter:** Jay, do you see yourself as a legend? How do you want to be remembered?

**Jay:** On my obituary, Jay Armes did it his way. One-liner, and that's it.

**Vanessa:** Even now, in his 80s, the taglines come easy. Though it's not clear how much work he actually does, he's still full of plans for the future. He wants to talk about where he's going, the TV shows, the big cases. But what I'm more interested in is how he got here.

Do you mind walking me through the accident? What happened that day?

**Jay:** Yes, it was a real nice day in May. And Dick Cables came up and says, "Let's go up to my house." I told my mother, said, "I'll be right back, mother." She says, "Please don't go."

**Vanessa:** Jay's mother had a bad feeling. But when Dick pulled up driving his parents' Chrysler, Jay went anyway. Dick was a few years older, from a wealthy family, and Jay thought he was pretty cool. When they got to Dick's house, the older boy handed Jay a box.

**Jay:** He says, "Open this box, and get two of those caps and just take the seal off, rub them together." I said, "What then?" "There's going to be sparklers." "All right." I opened the box, got two of those dynamite caps. I took the seal off. [lights fire] I barely rubbed them together, and they blasted. They blew me away 20ft. I landed on my face right next to a little tree, and I opened my eyes. I was trying to grab the tree to get up, and I couldn't. I felt like I had my hands in the fire.

**Vanessa:** Jay yelled for Dick to drive him to the hospital.

**Jay:** And I was holding my hands right close to the dashboard, and Dick had to wipe the blood so he could see to drive. We walked in the hospital, and they laid me down and put a shield in front of me. He told my dad, "We're going to have to amputate the hands at the wrist." I heard him.

**Vanessa:** It didn't make sense to Jay.

**Jay:** You see, I still felt my fingers and my hands.

**Vanessa:** But the doctors operated anyway. They took away his hands.

**Jay:** And they built me the prostheses. They were old-fashioned hooks. That was the only option.

**Vanessa:** Jay practiced with his new prosthetics day and night. He had to learn how to write, how to eat, how to catch a ball. He used the muscles in his biceps to open and close the hooks.

**Jay:** I still felt like my hands were in fire.

[school bell rings]

**Jay:** I went to school, and the bell rang. I got to my teacher. She said, "We're all going to work on the blackboard today."

**Vanessa:** Everyone except for Jay.

**Jay:** And I said, "Why?" "That's okay. We can wait till you learn how to write with chalk." I said, "Teacher, I can write with a chalk." I got on the blackboard, and I start writing. All of a sudden, one of the kids nods at me, and he says, "Look at the back of you." And it was the principal. He says, "I don't think that you're ready to come to school yet." "Why not?" "Look at the floor." There was a big old puddle of blood. My arms had torn open at the end. So, he asked the janitor to come in and mop the blood.

**Vanessa:** Listening to the story, I know I'm not breaking any new ground here. I'm sure he's told some version of this story hundreds of times. Still, I feel like I finally got a glimpse of something real. I can't tell if all these details are 100% true or not. Just like, I don't know if he's a great PI. All I want from him is a wink. Some kind of acknowledgment that the over-the-top trappings, the hyperbole, that's just branding. I want him to let me in on his genius marketing strategy. Eventually, I try to force it and ask about Gary's article in the process.

Do you remember a reporter named Gary Cartwright?

**Jay:** Gary Cartwright was a heroin addict. He's got a wilted hand, and I guess he had an inferiority complex. He saw Jay Armes had accomplished all this. So, he had to write a cutthroat story. Don't tell me about anything about this corrupt Gary Cartwright. Don't even mention his name to me. I think you're a little confused.

**Vanessa:** By the way, Gary Cartwright denies all these things.

Gary Cartwright aside, what I was trying to ask you about earlier, I think, is really the crux of the whole thing, which is just all of this, the doors that spin around, to most people, I think this seems like a Hollywood portrayal of what a private investigator is.

**Jay:** No, it's not Hollywood. If it was a Hollywood portrayal, it wouldn't be as big as this. I get better gadgets that you've seen in the Hollywood movies because they're for real. And the Hollywood movies are not for real. In the Hollywood movies, you never see an office this big. How in the world can you come in and say I'm trying to portray Hollywood portrayal?

**Vanessa:** I'm saying that’s just the impression that I [crosstalk] when I-- [crosstalk]

**Jay:** Our conversation is over. Thank you very much. You're a disappointment.

**Vanessa:** I don't see how--

**Jay:** You remember I told you-- do you remember I had a Lamborghini?

**Vanessa:** Yes. You said-- yes.

**Jay:** Here's a picture of my Lamborghini. Take a look at my Lamborghini.

**Vanessa:** What does this show me about you?

**Jay:** Because when I told you I had a Lamborghini, you had a little doubt, like I was trying to tell you that I had something I didn't. Here's a picture of my Lamborghini. A Lamborghini Countach that costs $250,000. But you see, the conversation is over. You disappoint me. Over here.

**Vanessa:** Jay J steers me towards the elevator. We take an extremely uncomfortable ride down to the first floor.

Can I get out this way?

He motions toward a garage door.

[garage door opening]

**Vanessa:** After Jay J kicked me out, I went looking for people to talk to. He still lives in Isleta, the part of El Paso where he grew up. I wanted to know what Jay J was like when he wasn't talking to a journalist or standing in front of a camera. Sure enough, I found 86-year-old Aurora Tarango.

**Aurora:** I've known him all my life. My mother and his mother were related. He was my brother's best friend. I still call him Julian. To me, he's one of the best men here in Isleta.

**Vanessa:** When people talk about him, they talk about his actual deeds, his presence in the neighborhood.

**Kathy:** Across the street is actually a little duplex, and that's where he grew up.

**Vanessa:** Kathy Hernandez first met Jay J when she was a kid. She says her grandmother knew him well.

**Kathy:** Grandmother set up a day where he picked us up in his limo, and we went to vote. It was Jay J. Armes.

**Vanessa:** Juanita Tapia is 101 years old. She used to live just down the street from Jay J. She says he picked her up to vote too.

**Juanita:** [Spanish language]

**Vanessa:** Jay actually ran in that election for city council and won. As a city councilman, she says he did a lot of good for the area. She credits him for replacing the area's dirt sidewalks with cement.

**Juanita:** [Spanish language]

**Vanessa:** Nobody I talked to had anything bad to say about Jay J. As for the possibility that all his boasts might be a little too good to be true, they're okay with it. That's what Gary found too. When he was looking for people to talk to for his article, he met a doctor who said he'd grown up with Jay.

**Gary:** I said, "This guy's all real phony. Did you try to expose him?" He said, "Why would I do that?" He said, "I understand the motive behind his behavior. Most people losing both hands would be the end of the show. For him, it was just the beginning."

**Vanessa:** Maybe this is where we talk about how impressive Jay J is anyway, whether the details are true or false because he overcame a challenge that would crush most of us.

**Gary:** To this day, I still admire him. His story is a real story, is amazing. He doesn't need all of the fiction with it.

**Vanessa:** On TV, Jay J became a hero. But perhaps the transformation was far more profound. When he first had his hands amputated, Jay told me that he'd lay there in the hospital bed, wanting to die. No more handshakes, no class rings, no fingerprints, no normal. But then, Jay devised a brilliant solution. The day after the incident at the chalkboard, he made a point of coming back to class.

**Jay:** The doctor had given me tranquilizers, but still I was in horrendous pain. After the bell rang, kids would run up to open the door for me.

**Vanessa:** But Jay stopped them and shut the door with his hooks. Then, making sure everyone could see, Jay fought back the pain, opened the door one more time and walked through.

**Jay:** I wouldn't say anything, but I was really telling them, "Hey, guys, I can do it. And I was going to be better than I was before."

**Vanessa:** 70 years later, Jay points proudly to a poster on the wall. It's a collage of superheroes.

**Jay:** There's Wonder Woman. There's Batman and Robin. There's Six Million Dollar Man. There's the Hulk, Incredible Hulk.

**Vanessa:** And nestled in with them, Jay. J Armes.

**Jay:** And you see all the superheroes there, they're all fiction except one. Jay J. Armes is real.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Big thanks to Vanessa Rancaño and to Gary Cartwright for sharing that story with us. We'll have a link to Gary's original article on our website, *snapjudgment.org*. The sound design for that piece was by Leon Morimoto. It was produced by Vanessa Rancaño.

When Snap Judgment returns, we're going to try to fix someone's brain. The. Fortress of Solitude episode continues right after this break. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Fortress of Solitude episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And on today's show, we're going deep inside to confront our inner stillness. Now, imagine spending the first four decades of your life in darkness before someone turns on the lights. John Robison tells us his story.

**John:** When Martha and I got together, she was very low-key because she's been depressed most of her life. Being autistic was like a good complement. She could say something like, "Oh, I'm really sad today. I can't go to work. I can't do this." I would ask myself sometimes, "What would be the best thing I could do for her?" And I would ask her that, she would say, "Well, just leave me alone. I'll be okay. Just leave me be, and I'll get over it." I would just say, "Okay, well, I got to go to work. I'll see you later on in the day."

Sadness didn't really rub off on me. She would always say she found my autistic predictability comforting.

**Davey:** John Robison learned that he had Asperger's syndrome, a type of autism, a few years before he met Martha at the age of 40. He barely felt anger or sadness, not even when he watched a really good movie or when he read the news. He also had difficulty feeling the good feels, like happiness and joy. So, thankfully, John had his wife, Martha.

**John:** When we would be together, I would rely on Martha to look at what was happening around me, and she would tell me, she would sometimes poke me, and she would say, "Stop talking so much about trains."

**Davey:** With her help, John did pretty well for himself. He was a good father to his son Cubby, and during the day, he ran his own auto body shop. He also became like a spokesperson for autism research and advocacy. His books on growing up with autism have been translated into 16 languages and sold in over 60 countries. But still, he felt like Tin Man.

**John:** People, sometimes they would describe me as robotic. People would say things, "Can't you see I'm busy?" "Can't you see I'm upset?" Or, "Can't you see she's upset?" And, of course, I had no clue. I started to construct this fantasy in my mind that, "What if I could see emotions in people? Wouldn't that be cool?" But I didn't really have any idea what it might actually be like. Certainly, I knew all it would ever be was a fantasy because there wasn't any way to change that. Everyone who talked about autism said, "Well, that's how you are, and there's nothing you can do about it."

**Davey:** Until one day, John was giving a talk at a local college.

**John:** I was about to start, and this person walks up to me, and she says she's got some flyers for an autism study. I asked her what it was about. She said that they were using a technique called transcranial magnetic stimulation, or TMS, to deliver energy into the brain where it would help improve emotional awareness in people with autism. I was like, "Wow, where do I sign up?"

**Davey:** John told his wife Martha and his son, Cubby, about signing up for the study.

**John:** She said, "What if it changes you and you don't like us anymore?" And I thought that was nutty. How could such a thing happen? When the scientists said, "Well, we hope that this kind of technology could help autistic people see emotional cues in others," I thought, "How could that be anything but good?" The fact is I felt like I was broken in this way, and I wanted to be fixed. They were very quick to explain, the effects of this were going to be temporary.

**Davey:** The researchers said that the effects of TMS should only last half the time of the actual session. His first session would be about half an hour. So, half that, John would hopefully feel something for about 15 minutes, which seemed kind of short.

**John:** But still, I thought just that experience would probably be transformative and beneficial. So, I thought, "What have I got to lose?" I just thought if I could read emotions in other people, it would just be better. I would be able to get these good messages of love and happiness that I couldn't get, and it would be better.

**Davey:** John drove two hours to the research center in Boston, Massachusetts. This would be one of the first TMS studies using subjects with autism. The researchers started off with a pretest where John looked at a face on a computer monitor and pushed buttons to decide whether they looked happy or sad. They would test them again after the session and compare results. So, they began. They put him in a metal tomb-like machine, hooked up John's brain with some wires.

**John:** They would step on a button, and it would start the coil firing. Pop. Pop. Pop. It put me in a meditative state. Pop. I didn't even notice the time going by. Then all of a sudden, it would be like click, and the fan would go off and the system would stop. The half-hour session had ended. I sure wondered, what is going to happen? They moved me over to the computer and I looked at the faces and the first time, I did that face test before the TMS, I had no idea what I was seeing. I did the faces again after the TMS and I was thinking to myself, "You're going to better at it. You're going to better. It's going to really change you." But I couldn't really tell. I didn't know. After that, finally, they sent me home.

I was walking out to the car, and I was just thinking, "What kind of crazy fool was I to think that I was going to walk in there and they were going to zap me with this machine and I was going to just walk out of there different?"

[car door opens and closes]

I got in the car, and I was two hours from home.

[engine starts]

I pulled on the highway, and I turned on the stereo. It was a set by Tavares. They were a soul and dance band back in the 70s, song called, *More Than a Woman*.

[*More Than a Woman* playing]

When the music came on, it was so alive that it just overwhelmed me, and it made me cry.

[*More Than a Woman* continues playing]

I was hearing the emotions and the joy, and I could even see it, and I never heard that before.

[*More Than a Woman* playing]

The chorus of the song *More Than a Woman* to me, years ago, I would have just heard that as kind of nonsense because, "Well, what's more? It's not more. It's just what she is." And suddenly, I got it.

[*More Than a Woman* playing]

I just listened to the music all night long. It was magical. I certainly felt an incredible sense of wonder that my dream had, if you will, come true. And in fact, not only could I not believe it had happened to me, but I almost immediately began to think, "Maybe none of this is real. This is just crazy, and I'm having a delusion."

**Davey:** When John woke up the next morning, the music didn't sound as beautiful as the night before. The TMS had worn off. The researchers didn't know why John had such a strong reaction compared to the other subjects in the study. So, they said, "Well, come over again and let's do more sessions." So, after one week, zap, zap, zap.

**John:** After I found myself reduced to tears reading newspaper stories. I could read a newspaper story about someone who got sick and died. I couldn't do it because I would get choked up trying to read it.

**Davey:** Also, John couldn't watch movies with his family at all. Scary movies would now terrify him, while sad scenes brought him to tears.

**John:** The morning after one of these stimulations, I walked into the waiting room at my car company, and it was like I was hit with this tsunami of emotion from the people sitting there. They were anxious, they were worried, and they were scared, and they were angry. One person comes up and she starts telling me about her car. I see, "Oh, she's worried about her kids and she's worried about her car. Can she afford to pay for this?" That was almost enough to make me start crying. I said, "Excuse me," and I go outside. I had to step out the front door just to get away from that. It didn't take long at all for me to realize that this ability to see emotions in people was not what I had fantasized. Frankly, it felt more disabling and overwhelming than being oblivious had been before.

**Davey:** The most profound changes were between John and his wife.

**John:** The thing that happened was, as I said earlier, we would wake up in the morning and Martha would say, "Well, I'm feeling sad. I'm going to stay in bed today." I would say, "Ah, okay, I'll see this evening," and I would go to work. Now, after the TMS, she would wake up and she wouldn't even have to say she was sad, and I would feel it.

**Davey:** John's identity and interactions outside of his home was also changing in big ways. He was talking to 250 doctors about his hope for TMS for people with autism. As he shared his experience, he noticed that all these doctors were crying as they listened to him, and that had never happened to him before. He went home and told his wife how neat that was. And she said--

**John:** "Well, you won't need me anymore," and I just felt so sad at that. I think she felt that suddenly if I could see emotion in other people, she thought I would have no use for her. And, of course, I thought that she meant more to me than just seeing those emotions.

**Davey:** But Martha was kind of right. John was now emboldened.

**John:** I thought that I had these kind of superpower abilities to connect with people and make friends. I could have a whole new life.

**Davey:** Also, John didn't know how to handle Martha and her sadness with his newfound emotions.

**John:** I felt like her sadness was crushing me. It also pushed me away from her. I thought I couldn't take it anymore. It really was a big factor in destroying our marriage.

I left. It was me that left. I moved into the Sheraton in Downtown Springfield. I was miserable, and I wanted to kill myself. The truth of seeing emotions in other people did not set me free.

**Davey:** John participated in half a dozen studies over two years. But they were just studies. They weren't ongoing treatments. They weren't permanent fixes for autism.

**John:** The treatments ended because the scientists doing the work kind of scattered to the winds. And had they stayed together, I would have continued doing the studies, but they didn't.

**Davey:** Yeah, because I'm curious, because you went through a lot of negative experiences, and yet you still wanted to keep on going. What about it still appealed to you at that point?

**John:** I still felt that knowledge was power, and I felt like the TMS, by showing me things about myself and things about other people, even if the things I saw were painful, they were ultimately empowering to me. I was just beginning to see how even the change I had was really starting to turn my life upside down.

**Davey:** While the effects of TMS gradually petered out, he's now better at socializing with people and clients, and most importantly, he's better at relating to his son, Cubby. And yet--

**John:** There are still many times when I wish I could just go back to 1995, when I was just a guy with a car business and a little boy and a motorboat to ride on after work and no knowledge of autism and none of this stuff. It's just like if you're colorblind and suddenly you see color, even if that ability fades away, your life will never be the same. And that's how it is for me. My life has gotten so complicated.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, John, for that incredible story. Today, John teaches neurodiversity in the first program of its kind at the college of William & Mary. He also continues his love for car restoration in Springfield, Massachusetts. If you want to learn more about John's TMS story, check out his latest book, *Switched On*. We'll have links on our website, *snapjudgment.org*. That story was sound designed and produced by Davey "Triple Threat" Kim.

[upbeat music]

It's about that time. Yep. But more amazing storytelling awaits, Snappas. Don't be short changed. Give yourself a movie of the mind, a cinema of sound. Subscribe to the amazing Snap Judgment storytelling podcast at *snapjudgment.org*.

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