[Snap Judgment intro]

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so, when I get to the University of Michigan, it's not that I suddenly realize I'm stupid, because I'm not stupid. I'm not. But after faking myself through a few conversations about Kant, about Aristotle, about microfinance strategies for female empowerment, it occurs to me that all the books that I've read until this point either have dragons or spaceships on the cover. But these people here, they have real educations. They've flown in planes, they make jokes to each other in French. Not my hilarious fake French accent, [makes French-sounding noises]. No, the actual French. I have this sudden dread, this fear that I don't know anything about anything, that I do not belong. I'm an imposter. I'm a fake. I don't even know where to start playing catch up, so I just meddle through. Just because I don't know something, it doesn't mean I can't have strong opinions about it.

Then, there's this woman, and good Lord, not only does she know stuff, she's the most beautiful person I've ever seen. Help me. And so, I get a plan, and I try to study up on a subject, right? Maybe ichthyology, the study of fishes. Maybe Roman history. I get the CliffNotes version of whatever it is. I read it. I steer almost accidentally whoops, and steer the conversation toward my newfound area of expertise. "Hey, you know the arc in the law school? It is so pretty. So pretty. It reminds me of another pseudo gothic scheme from Germany's Cologne Cathedral."

And I don't know how this works. I don't, but we actually start kicking it, she and I. And my roommate says, “Wow, I don't know how she's with you.” The cashier lady admires, the grocery store, looks at her, looks at me and says, “I don't know how she's with you.” It's like everyone's reading my mind. I pretend I don't care because she is with me. Probably not for long, but for right now, everybody's just hating.

We're walking down the street holding hands. She's telling me about her trip to South Africa, which for me may as well be Oz. But I'm listening attentively like a good boyfriend, and she says this guy Tommy, he's a follower of Stephen Biko. And my words that come out before I can stop them, I say, “Who's Stephen Biko?” Then the world spins. The earth trembles. She rips her hand from my grip, turns unbelievingly at me and asks, “You don't know who Stephen Biko is?”

Time slows to a full jeopardy stop. "Stephen Biko. Stephen Biko. I should absolutely know this. I should, but I don't know this. And when I get it wrong, she's going to walk away in disgust. She's never going to look back. She's going to wonder how she ever got mixed up with this barbarian." Two seconds, three seconds. And then I remember the Peter Gabriel song. Is it that--? "Oh, Stephen Biko, the South African freedom fighter. I thought you was talking about somebody else." She looks at me hard and extends her hand back into my own and we continue our stroll.

Inside, I'm tripping. If she asks me even one question about this Biko character, just one, it's over, because I know nothing. My goose is cooked. But she doesn't ask and I'm safe to fake my way through another day. So, when she does break up with me because of our inherent intellectual incompatibility or whatever she says, I'm actually relieved. I'll go back to reading books with dragons on the cover. Yes, I do still have some catch up to do, but I figure they make CliffNotes for a reason.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Today on Snap Judgment, Head Games. Amazing stories from real people whose minds are playing tricks on them. My name is Glynn Washington. Please study the life and times of Stephen Biko. Seriously, because you're listening to Snap Judgment. Snap.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** We begin in the year 2010, Nyge Turner, barely old enough to legally watch *Inception*, his favorite PG-13 movie. Good choice, Nyge, take it away.

**Nyge:** Tonight is the night. So, the squad and I show up to the party three hours late on purpose walking in with a fresh pair of black skinny jeans, a short sleeve flannel shirt, and "I love boobies" bracelets all up my left arm. Like, y'all remember those bracelets? I remember my dad first saw one and he was like, “Yo, what is that?” I was like, “They're for breast cancer awareness.” And he was like, “Oh.” [laughs] But at that moment, I hear the music switch to Frankie Beverly's before I let go. It snaps me right out of what was supposed to be the coolest party entrance ever. I run to the dance floor, looking around in a panic, because this is our song. And then, there she is. Tracy.

Tracy, my dance partner, my ride or die, my best friend. We dance together for about two hours that long old song until it's time to go home. Back home with Tracy, because Tracy is my mom. If you ran into my family around this time my mom would say something like this, “Here's my husband, Leland. My son, Caleb. But this one, Nigel.” Nigel's my friend. She tells me, sometimes, “If life's got you down, you just got to ask for a little advice from Auntie Lauryn Hill, cousin India Ivory,” and my mom's second best friend, Mary J. Blige.

My mom also reads me like a book. When I turned 17, my older brother and my dad are fighting all the time, and I just didn't want to be here. I wanted to run away. So, I grab a duffel bag, head to my closet, start packing my clothes. Then, I hear the sound of the house's floor creaking. It's getting louder. I quickly throw the duffel bag in the closet. Now, this is the part of the story where I say someone opens the door and someone walks in, but in the Turner house, my door always had to stay open. And so, my mom just walks in, and I hit her with the, “What you doing in my hood? She looks at me and says, “You leaving me?”

I look down at the floor. “I don't know what else to do, mom. I'm not happy. Living here just feels like a weight on my chest, and I just want to breathe again.” I've always been on the dramatic side, and she is too. But this time, I mean it. And she knows. "Nyge, your father and I always knew you were going to need to spread your wings early. We talk about it all the time but let us make sure you have the basic tools you need to make it outside. You need three things. A credit score, a car, and a high school diploma. Just give it six months, then you can go." "Okay, I could do that." That's the last real conversation I remember having with my mom.

Four months later, my mom is a court reporter at the Alameda County Superior Courthouse in Oakland, California, a place famous for the Black Panther marches in the late-1960s. I always thought she looked like Alicia Keys, the way she typed on the machine, like, piano keys. She goes to work one day, just like any other. The court has been working on this particular case for hours, and this judge is notorious for never taking breaks. She's typing away on her stenotype machine, and her body begins to feel uneasy, almost like she has low blood sugar. This had happened to my mom before. They couldn't explain why it was happening, but they described it as a glitch. She just faints sometimes, is what I remember a doctor saying after a family dinner got cut short for this same reason. So, she tells the judge what's happening. Put her head down, closed her eyes, and she faints.

I try not to think about this next part too much, because it pulls my mind into all the what-ifs. But for some reason, no one woke her up, at least not right away. They just let her lay there with her head down. When they get her to a hospital, it seems like she's gone without oxygen to her brain for a long time. We find out that she suffered severe cognitive brain damage.

To be honest, we didn't notice at first. But half a year later, at my graduation party, my mom goes out and gets me a cake that says congratulations. Then, she goes out and gets the exact same cake again. At first, I tell myself, we all have our little mix-ups, but then other signs. She can't keep up at work anymore, and she's forced to leave. I pack up her office for her, and her desk is a sea of sticky notes, just trying so hard to remember. It's sad, but it warms my heart just seeing how hard she tried. We take her to a bunch of doctors, specialists, neurologists. We drive her down to Stanford. They could tell she has severe brain damage, but no one could tell why it was getting worse. Then, I start to notice the way people look at her.

I go grocery shopping with my mom, and while waiting in the line to pay, she walks up to random people and says things like, “Hey, it's great to see you again.” And then they're like, “What?” And then I jump in and try to explain. Then they look at her with pity and talk to her like she's a child. It makes me furious, and then embarrassed, and then furious again, then exhausted. Slowly, she starts to lose more and more of her abilities. She stops being able to drive, she stops being able to cook, she starts having trouble dressing herself. And so, I start to spend less time with my old best friend. And what I mean is, I'm no longer enjoying the time together. I'm still picking out her clothes for the day. I help her cook and drive her to all her doctor's appointments, but I'm just looking for any chance or excuse to get away.

It gets to the point where I'm upset with her for things that aren't her fault. She asked me multiple times to take her to grandpa's, and eventually, I pretend not to hear. One night, I'm in my room with my headphones on and my mom walks in. She sits on my bed. I take my headphones off, “What's going on,” I say. I'm not really sure what's happening. Then she says, “Are you mad at me?” She starts to open her mouth again. I freeze up. “You're my son, but you used to be my friend, right?” “I'm sorry, mom. Of course, I'm your friend.” I jump out of bed and I hug her as tight as my frozen body can. She smiles. She's happy with my answer, and she walks out my room. But all I can think is, I'm no longer a good son. Am I even her friend?

I've always struggled with anxiety, but now I'm having at least one panic attack a day. After breaking many promises to my girlfriend to get help, I finally did. At this one particular session, I spent 20 minutes telling the doctor about how mom and I used to dance to Frankie Beverly, how we used to cook her famous mac and cheese, and how it was just mom and me time. And then the doctor hit me with this. “Why do you keep talking about your mom in the past tense?” I didn't have answer. “Yes, things have changed, but she still loves you and holds those same emotions.”

The next morning, it's like any morning. The sun isn't even out yet and it's time to go pick up my mom and drop her off at my grandpa's house, so that my dad could go to work. So, I walk in the house, say hi to my dad, he rushes off. I head upstairs. My heart is pounding. I pass by my brother, Caleb's room, then walk towards my mom's. She's lying in bed, resting. We still got an hour or so before we got to leave. So, I pass her room wondering, should I say something? Nah, she's probably sleeping. “Nyge?” How'd she know it was me? “Yeah, it's me, mom.” “Can you come lay down in here with me?” “No, I'm going to lay in my room.” Why did I say that?

The me of yesterday would say that, yeah, but not the me from the party I thought I was going to-- I don't know, I start walking in my room and get halfway there before, “Wait, what am I doing? All these years, she came and laid in your bed and talked to you whenever you needed her. Boy, get your butt in there.” I turn around, run, and jump into my mom's bed. Immediately, she starts rubbing my hair along with the grain. Not against the grain, which she knows I hate. Then I take out my phone, I hit stop on the pity party that I've been throwing myself and I hit record on the first real conversation we've had in six years. You said, if somebody's hurting you, what?

**Nyge's Mother:** If somebody hurts you?

**Nyge:** Mm-hmm.

**Nyge's Mother:** I have to hurt.

**Nyge:** Go hurt.

**Nyge's Mother:** I have to get them.

**Nyge:** You got to get them?

**Nyge's Mother:** That's right. That's what mothers do.

**Nyge:** And if something bad happens to me, you say you're going to get me?

**Nyge's Mother:** You areright.

**Nyge:** How are you going to get me?

**Nyge's Mother:** I'm going to get you. Don't you worry. [Nyge chuckles] That's what mothers do.

**Nyge:** You remember we used to sit, like, in my room, all night and just talk on my bed?

**Nyge's Mother:** Well, if you like me to do that for you, I do that for you, okay?

**Nyge:** I miss those talks.

**Nyge's Mother:** Okay.

**Nyge:** I'm sorry I haven't really talked to you in a long time.

**Nyge's Mother:** Well, you're growing up. You're a good person, Nyge. And don't let nobody tell you anything different, okay?

**Nyge:** Mm-hmm. You think I'm a good son?

**Nyge's Mother:** You're a great son.

**Nyge:** I think you're a great mom.

**Nyge's Mother:** Thank you.

**Nyge:** You know that?

**Nyge's Mother:** I try. I really do.

**Nyge:** It's not about trying. You know you're a good mom, right?

**Nyge's Mother:** Yeah, I'm good. I think I am.

**Nyge:** Stop. No, I think you're a good mom, okay?

**Nyge's Mother:** Thank you.

**Nyge:** Say it.

**Nyge's Mother:** I'm a good mom.

**Nyge:** That's it.

**Nyge's Mother:** Yeah. Something happens with you, it happens to me. Let nobody hurt my baby.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Nyge, for sharing your story. We here at Snap Nation send you and all your family, big love. This piece was brought to you by Adult ISH. It's a culture, advice, and storytelling podcast about adulting, cohosted by Nyge Turner and Merck Nguyen. It's produced entirely by the young folks at YR Media and Snap Judgment alumni, Davey Kim. The kick and sound design on that piece was by DJ Clay Xavier. Adult ISH, distributed by our fine friends at Radiotopia from PRX. Be sure to check out their Mom ISH episode to hear how Nyge and his mom are doing now of a link on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

When Snap judgment returns, Walmart like you've never imagined when Snap Judgment, the Head Games episode continues. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Head Games episode. Our next story comes to us from Believable. It's a new podcast by Narratively. It's a show about how stories define who we are. And this story begins in a few different places, but here's what you need to know. A man named Steve Peck, father of five, biology professor, and devout Mormon. He was cataloging insects in Vietnam. It was a trip would change everything.

**Steve:** By the time we got into the rainforest, it was early afternoon. The sounds were rich. Frogs and birds were chipping. The butterflies were gorgeous. There were beautiful beetles everywhere. I was turning over logs and things, looking for things like I was a little kid. Everything was new and filled with opportunities. And so, things like this chance to go to Vietnam really seemed exciting. This sense of the importance of this little patch of land came over me. There was a profound sense that this place mattered to God.

Before this, I was a pretty typical latter-day saint. I would go to church. I'd take my family to church. I would pray often. I'd pray over my family and offer blessings. I would say, I know that these things are true that God is all powerful and that Satan has no power or influence over God. And the things that happened during this event made no sense from that light. I accepted that Satan could block out God, and I accepted that I was under his power and there was nothing that anybody, not even God, could do to get me out of that. I'd been held captive by demons and tortured and had my entire family captured. This had been one of the worst things that had ever happened to me.

**Ash:** Steve Peck had been back from Vietnam for six months when the headaches started.

**Steve:** This affected my entire head, and it really felt like somebody was taking a sledgehammer to them. At the same time, my vision started to look funny. I would look at lights and there would be a fuzzy haze.

**Ash:** These symptoms persisted for months. Steve went through a series of tests, sleep studies, and spinal taps. They'd given him eyedrops for an eye infection and drugs for his headaches. Nothing was working, and it was only getting worse.

**Steve:** My son had a birthday party. And at the birthday party, I started feeling really sick. I had trouble forming words and remembering how to say things.

**Lori:** I was really worried and concerned.

**Ash:** That's Lori Peck, Steve's wife.

**Lori:** He woke up, and he threw up, and he couldn't remember the kids' names.

**Steve:** It was disturbing to me, and it was really disturbing to Lori because it was obvious that something was really wrong. That's the beginning. That's where it started.

**Ash:** Lori took Steve to the emergency room in the middle of the night. The doctors gave him antibiotics and sent him home. And the next morning, he was feeling a little better. But later that night, when he was trying to get some rest, Steve's head started pounding again.

**Steve:** All of a sudden, I noticed that the lamp over our head was starting to glow this beautiful green, and that the bread spread itself was starting to shine. Out of the lamp, these beautiful sprays of green were coming out. My head quit hurting. I just thought, “This is amazing. This is wonderful.” And I woke up Lori, and I said, “Look at this. It's beautiful.”

**Lori:** He was just very agitated, and he was seeing things. He would go downstairs. I would bring him back upstairs, get him into bed. Then he would be back up out of bed again, seeing things out in the backyard that really weren't there.

**Ash:** Through the bedroom window, Steve watched as crowds of people march across the backyard. He saw elephants grazing in the apple orchard, and none of it had the fuzziness of a dream. To him, it didn't seem odd.

**Steve:** I didn't think or it didn't occur to me that I should question this reality.

**Ash:** Lori was worried.

**Lori:** I have never seen him act like that. He'd never act like that before that night.

**Ash:** She stayed up watching Steve as long as she could. But at some point, she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. Steve was wide awake, watching the fountain of light coming from the lamp.

**Steve:** All of a sudden, people started to arrive in our room. There were groups of four people or five people wandering through our bedroom, and they were looking at things like it was a museum. I couldn't really hear what they were saying. They were talking quietly. There was something about them that was so frightening. I was scared to death of them. Finally, I spoke up and I said, “Could you people go?” And they turned around and looked at me. It was apparent that I had done something that wasn't to be done. They told me that I was now part of the Great Satan Walmart Organization, and I was in their power.

**Ash:** That's right. He said the Great Satan Walmart organization. It was an evil corporation run by the devil himself. What was so strange about that was that it wasn't strange at all, not to Steve.

**Steve:** I believed it. I mean, not even belief is the right word. It was just the reality that I was under. I was part of the St. Walmart Organization. I essentially had no more power of my own.

**Ash:** Sitting there on the bed, Steve suddenly felt a different presence in the room with him.

**Steve:** I looked over and I realized that it was Satan laying in bed next to me. I still saw Lori, but I knew it was Satan that he had taken her appearance. And so, I started trying to choke him out.

**Lori:** I woke up not being able to breathe. He was on top of me with his hands around my neck. I immediately pushed him off. I was scared, “What are you doing?” He didn't really say anything.

**Steve:** She choked out, “What are you doing?” I backed off immediately because I knew it was her.

**Lori:** He looked like when you see someone and you can just tell they're just not all there, it wasn't really him.

**Steve:** She became really scared. She knew that I was now dangerous.

**Lori:** I felt shocked. Obviously, I didn't go back to sleep, but I didn't let my emotions take over as much. I stuck them in the back of my head, and I felt like I really needed to get him to the doctor.

**Ash:** Lori stayed awake until the morning watching Steve. She tried to stay calm. She got the kids off to school, and then she took Steve to the ER. You signed him in at the hospital. Do you remember what you said? Were you just like, my husband's lost it, or what did you tell them?

**Lori:** I told him that he's hallucinating, seeing things. I just remember waiting hours for him to get in.

**Steve:** We were in the waiting room, and I noticed that they'd filled the hospital with giant insects. It was a little disconcerting because as a biologist, I should have known what kind they were, but I didn't. The giant insects were maybe the size of a softball. They were multicolored, beautifully colored, yellows and reds, and they had flowery antenna. They were actually really gorgeous, and they were just crawling around on the floor like little robots. They just were zipping around.

**Lori:** He would be looking under the coffee table, just sitting there, just staring underneath and he's like, “Look at all the butterflies under there.” He just saw tons of butterflies under the coffee table.

**Ash:** After hours of waiting, Steve was finally admitted and given a room. He was in bad shape. He was running a high fever, and his brain was showing signs of inflammation. Over the next few days, the doctors started to run tests. They did a spinal tap and ruled out a bacterial infection. Then they did an MRI, and that was inconclusive too. They put Steve on antivirals and antipsychotics, but neither had any effect. The doctors were stumped.

**Lori:** They just had no idea. They just did not know what was going on.

**Ash:** While Lori dealt with the doctors, Steve was immersed in a dark new reality. Knowledge about this world would pop into his mind, fully formed. He understood right away that the entire hospital was under Satan Walmart's control.

**Steve:** Satan Walmart wanted to take over the world. They were, in my mind, powerful beyond reason. The hospital was sort of their operation center.

**Ash:** Satan Walmart's goal was to build an army, and they were doing that by converting people and cloning them. Steve was trying to warn the doctors and nurses. Obviously, no one took him seriously, but there was still one person he hoped would believe him.

**Steve:** I was waiting for Lori, and I was standing outside my hospital room. Someone walked up who looked a lot like Lori, but all of a sudden, she let out a bunch of strings of F words, which Lori would never do. I knew that this was not my wife. She was a copy of Lori.

**Ash:** Steve understood what was happening immediately. Satan Walmart had captured and cloned his family.

**Steve:** They had made copies of all my kids, and they were training them to be assassins.

**Ash:** Lori, the real Lori, walked up moments later.

**Lori:** He told me that we had clone kids, the evil version of them. I was trying to tell him there were no clone kids.

**Ash:** Steve felt responsible for these kids. Sure, they were evil clones, but they were his kids. Lori had reached her limit. Their real kids were at home, and she had been the one taking care of them since Steve got sick two months before. Even though none of that was Steve's fault, Lori couldn't hold back her frustration.

**Lori:** I just told him I needed a break, and I left the hospital, went in the car, cried, just got it out, and then came back, and stayed with him.

**Ash:** A week later, Steve hadn't gotten any better, and Lori was struggling. Every morning, she'd wake up and get her kids off to school, and then she'd be in the hospital with Steve from noon to 10:00 PM. To get through it, she had to put her feelings aside. And even now, she sounds a bit detached when she talks about it.

**Lori:** I just needed to be there for him. I tried not let my emotions get the best of me. At the end of the day, when I would get home, I would just go and cry.

**Ash:** Every day on our way to and from the hospital, Lori prayed.

**Lori:** I don't think I was doing any formal prayers just to help Steve get better and help me get through this.

**Ash:** But it seemed like Steve was only getting worse. He was still having wild hallucinations, and his health was declining dramatically, and the doctors couldn't find a reason.

**Steve:** They couldn't stop it. They couldn't find a way to get it under control. I was getting sicker and sicker.

**Glynn:** Snappas, it ain't over. After the break, the doctors make one last attempt to save Steve's life when Snap Judgment, the Head Games episode continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Head Games episode. My name is Glynn Washington. When last we left, Steve was held captive by demons, and doctors were trying everything they could to save his life.

**Ash:** After almost two weeks in the hospital, Steve's body was failing him, and he was getting more and more lost in the darkness of his own mind.

**Steve:** I was way more listless. I couldn't move around. I was more inclined to live in a world that was completely different from this one.

**Ash:** Normally, Steve would reach out to God when he felt alone. He'd ask for help or blessings. But in Steve's new reality, that was impossible. Satan Walmart had built a shield over the hospital that was powerful enough to block out God.

**Steve:** I could tell my prayers weren't going anywhere and I could tell that God was completely oblivious to what was going on in the hospital. It made me immeasurably sad. It just, in a way, broke my heart. I realized my helplessness.

**Ash:** That's when Steve started to give up.

**Steve:** I just knew I didn't feel good, and my head was hurting all the time. I just wanted it to be over, and I want this to go away.

**Ash:** He was having some pretty intense doubts about his faith. Did he talk to you about that at all?

**Lori:** He felt like God was not there and had disappeared. I tried to let him know He was there, but I understood what he was saying.

**Ash:** Did you remember thinking he was going to die?

**Lori:** I remember thinking, how am I going to take care of the kids and raise them? Steve was laying in bed, and I was just in one of the chairs on the side, and I saw standing at the end of the bed, just faintly, my granddad. My granddad had passed away when I was 13 of a brain tumor. It was almost like he was standing there with compassion and understanding, with having your brain be affected by a disease. It was nice just feeling like my prayers are being heard, and there's family on the other side there that knows what's going on.

**Ash:** The next day, the Pecks got a visitor.

**Lori:** Some kind of infectious disease doctor came in and wanted to know the history of what happened.

**Ash:** The man was Dr. Bruce Hathaway. He was a specialist in infectious diseases who had just relocated to Utah from North Carolina. The hospital brought him in in a last-ditch effort to figure out what was wrong with Steve, Lori told him everything that had happened. When she mentioned offhand that Steve had visited Vietnam, his ears perked up.

Steve's other doctors weren't familiar with diseases from that part of the world. That's why they didn't take his trip into account. But this doctor was an expert, and he knew exactly what was going on. Steve had melioidosis, a disease caused by a soil organism known as Burkholderia pseudomallei. It's a bacteria that's common in Southeast Asia. Most often, it causes a lung infection. As a blood infection, it's fatal. But in Steve's case, it had gotten into his brain.

Sometime during that trip to Vietnam in 2001, when Steve had been turning over logs and looking for beetles, he'd gotten some dirt on his hand. Then he'd scratched his eye and the bacteria had crawled inside. Over the course of six months, it climbed his optic nerve to his brain, because it bypassed the spine, it didn't show up in spinal taps. That's why the other doctors thought it was viral. Later, Steve looked into the medical literature. There were only six known cases of this bacteria showing up as a brain infection, and three of those people had died.

Finally, they had a name for what was ailing Steve. And the doctor had a simple solution. He put Steve on a cocktail of three powerful antibiotics. But after two days, Steve was still hallucinating, and he was still concerned about his cloned kids.

**Steve:** Lori took me for my usual walk, and I saw my copied kids throughout the day. I told them, “We're going to meet at 8 o’clock to discuss where you're going to live.” I told Lori we're going to meet at 08:00, and she said, “We don't have any copied kids. They're not coming.” And I said, “No, they're good kids. They're going to be here.”

**Lori:** I was going to meet them at a certain hour. We waited and waited. The hour came.

**Steve:** So, at 8 o’clock, they weren't there. I was really surprised, and I was annoyed. I thought, “You know, what are they doing, standing me up?” I tell Lori, “They're still coming. I don't know where they are.” And she said, “They're not coming. You don't have any copied kids. They're not coming.” I was essentially watching the clock to see how late they were. And at about 15 after, I was really worried, and I thought I heard him in the hall. I went and I looked. I didn't see them.

**Lori:** He's buying some time, like, maybe they're late.

**Steve:** The world's restructuring, how can this be? This isn't the way it's supposed to be.

**Lori:** And at that point, Steve then thought--

**Steve:** What if Lori's right? This is cool that it unfolded while I'm watching a clock. 15 minutes later, I thought, this is all a hallucination. It was over. I never saw any more assassin kids or clones of Lori. The doctors all went back to normal. It was funny watching me go from insane at 8 o’clock to quarter to 09:00 having rational thoughts again for the first time. It was a moment of almost transcendental joy.

**Lori:** Oh, I was ecstatic.

**Steve:** One of my big worries the whole time was they're trying to get Lori into Satan Walmart that she was safe with such a joy and a relief. For the first time in that whole week and a half, I was out. I asked how she was doing, and then she knew that I was back to normal.

**Ash:** A week later, Steve was well enough to go home. The road to recovery would be long. He would have to be on antibiotics for a few months and get lots of rest. But the doctor said he would recuperate fully. Steve started to feel better physically, but emotionally, he felt haunted.

**Steve:** From my brain's perspective, I'd been held captive by demons. All day long, people were trying to hurt my family, do all these terrible things. Even though I knew rationally that that had never happened, the experience was as traumatic as if it had been real. I became really frightened of diseases. If I got a sinus infection, I'd just fall apart because I had one just before this happened. It was just an object of terror. I was afraid it would occur that the bacteria would come back, and I was scared to death about that.

**Ash:** After this ordeal, Lori was going through issues of her own.

**Lori:** After Steve got home, all those emotions that I kept bottled up came tumbling down. I just cried a lot. We really depended on each other. We just got through it one day at a time.

**Ash:** But the questions Steve had were longer lasting. He was shaken by how easily and completely he had bought into another reality.

**Steve:** It was frightening in a way that I could literally rewrite my entire belief system under the influence of a bacteria. I accepted that Satan could block out God, and I accepted that I was under his power. There was nothing that anybody, not even God, could do to get me out of that. And so, I was led by my brain to believe things that would have been unimaginable to believe before this.

**Ash:** Before he got sick, Steve used to stand up in front of his congregation and say what he believed. Mormons call it bearing your testimony.

**Steve:** I used to say, I know that this is true, that Jesus atoned for my sins and things. I'd say, I know.

**Ash:** But Steve's illness had shaken his confidence. He couldn't say that phrase. I know he still believed in God, and he kept going to church. But the thing that used to comfort him about faith, the certainty of it, didn't comfort him anymore. After what he'd been through, he couldn't say he knew anything for sure. So, he did something radical. He stopped believing in certainty altogether.

**Steve:** I think it's good to be uncertain. And in part, I think this experience moved me away from arguments about right and wrong in people's belief systems, because I completely recognize that I could be wrong. That's fine. I'm going to be wrong about a lot of things. Maybe about everything. [chuckles] So, that's okay.

**Ash:** To a non-Mormon, this might not feel like a big move. But I grew up Mormon, and I can tell you, it's a really big deal. I was told again and again that people who had doubts were bad, weak, they were faithless. It was an embarrassing thing to be faithless as a kid, and later as an adult, I spent years obsessively, hiding my own doubts. So, to see Steve do this thing, to still go to church, but refuse to say he knows, it's pretty revolutionary.

**Steve:** I would say, I know that these things are true. Now, I couch it more in terms of I believe these things, and I'm grateful for those beliefs because they structure me and give me guidance.

**Ash:** When Steve was sick, he was cut off from reality, from his ideas about faith, even from God. But in all the chaos, there was one constant.

**Steve:** All my beliefs about the world got scrambled. But the one thing that this whole experience didn't touch were my relationships with my family. The trivia of beliefs didn't really matter, but relationships, they stayed.

**Ash:** It's been almost two decades since Steve had this experience. His kids have grown up, and he and Lori have become grandparents. Steve still goes to church, but that's not where he really feels connected to the divine. He feels it when he holds his grandkids or goes camping with his friends. He feels it in shared experiences with the people he loves.

**Steve:** It's experiences that give me hope that this universe has a purpose and that I'm a part of that. I think people have this too when they're in nature that sense of awe, that sense of connection with something bigger than themselves. And for me, that's what faith is, that I'm in communication with something bigger than me.

**Ash:** It's the same feeling Steve had 18 years ago, standing in the jungle in Vietnam.

**Steve:** There was a profound sense that this place mattered to God. The forest can form relationships with people and with itself, and I felt that. I felt connected to it, even though it was going to nuke me later. [laughs]

**Glynn:** A huge thank you to the Believable podcast for sharing this story with Snap. Steve Peck, he now works at Brigham Young University, and he tells this story to his microbiology class every year. You can check out his novel, *A Short Stay in Hell*, which inspired this episode. It was produced by Ash Sanders and Ryan Sweikert, with help from Emily Rostek and Noah Rosenberg. Ryan also did the mix and the sound design. You can visit *narratively.com/believable* to hear all the new episodes and subscribe. For a list of credits and to find a link to all Believable episodes, we'll have it at *snapjudgment.org*.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Snappas, it's the end of the show, but the show has no end. If you've missed even a moment or you want more amazing original storytelling than you can shake a stick at, including the story about how a song one man created was used in the worst way possible. You got to hear it. Go ahead, get the amazing Snap Judgment storytelling podcast on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, RadioPublic, TuneIn, or wherever you get your podcast. Snap Judgment cinematic, in your head, change your life podcast. If you like your storytelling in the dark of night, number one supernatural podcast in the world, Snap Judgment presents Spooked.

Snap was brought to you by the team that only very rarely loses their minds. Please give some love to the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. Anna Sussman, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Shaina Shealy, Nancy López, Liz Mak, Eliza Smith, Teo Ducot, Nikka Singh, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Flo Wiley, Lauryn Newson, Renzo to the Gorrio, and Leon Morimoto.

Even though this is not the news, no way is this the news. In fact, you go take two aspirins and go to bed and plan to call your doctor in the morning, only to wake up three days later knowing two things. One, that wasn't aspirin. And two, this is not your bed. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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