[Snap Judgment intro]

**Ramtin:** At a time when information continues to come at us faster and faster, sometimes you need to hit pause and rewind. NPR's Throughline takes you back in time to the source of the news stories filling your feet. Find NPR’s Throughline wherever you get your podcasts.

**Glynn:** We have these categories, these lines, black- white, Hindu- Muslim, rich-poor, documented-undocumented. We've even got sneetches with stars and sneetches with no stars, where we can do terrible things to the people on the other side of the line we draw. This is true. But it's also true that you can do whatever you want to do. Start a war, pass a law, build a wall, whatever you want to separate folk. And I absolutely, positively 100% guarantee that somehow, someway, two people are going to look over this barrier you've constructed. And despite everything, they are going to decide that the person they need more than anyone else in the universe is over there on the other side.

It's a law of nature. And now, I can't promise a happy ending. I don't know, if everything's going to work out. I just know that someone's going to try. And when they try because of the age we're in, they're going to want to take a picture to document the occasion. And so, today, on Snap judgment, we proudly present Photo Session, where a picture tells far more than a thousand words. My name is Glynn Washington. Say cheese when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** We begin in 2017, where journalist Anna Lekas Miller was living with her boyfriend, Salem, in Istanbul. When she gets a phone call, Salem is being deported to Erbil, a city in Iraq. And Anna has to make a very big decision right now. Snap Judgment.

[intriguing music]

**Anna:** That was the only place where we could be together. It didn't seem like we would get a visa anywhere else anytime soon, so I really felt myself committing to being with Salem, no matter what, no matter where we were.

Suddenly, I realized that there must be so many other couples like us in the world. It really started me on, you could say, a journey of trying to find couples from around the world whose lives had been shaped by borders. I wanted to see if people could stay together even when the world was keeping them apart, which is how I ended up in Shatila camp.

Shatila camp is a Palestinian refugee camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut. You see Palestinian flags draped across the alleyway from one window to another. Palestinian embroidery. Restaurants may be named after a city in Palestine. You'll see all of these next to the electrical wires that are hanging from the buildings. You see the buildings tilting towards one another in a way that feels like it could collapse in on itself.

I'd been to Shatila many times before, but this time I was going to meet a young Palestinian couple, Samih and Rayan. I wanted to know more about them. I wanted to know their story. They were Palestinian, living in Lebanon, where I know for a fact that Palestinians are facing so many restrictions that choke their way of life and ability to be themselves and follow their dreams. I saw these two people who looked so incredibly happy and fulfilled with one another that I wanted to know how they found that joy in that circumstance.

**John:** I think that if I didn't fall in love in this place, I couldn't have stayed here.

**Anna:** So, when I first see Samih, he's wearing this bright pink windbreaker and is smiling at the end of the alleyway.

[people talking in the background]

**Anna:** Rayan is right next to him, wearing her hijab in like a turban style. And she's wearing these cute little gold-hoop earrings underneath.

[people talking in the background]

**Sarah:** Samih is boyish and impish, always laughing, even if he's telling a really dark joke.

[Samih talking in the background]

**Anna:** And Rayan is this total badass. She's tiny, but as a fiercely independent woman rides a motorcycle around the camp. It's easy to see why they get along and why they fit together like these two perfect puzzle pieces. But in many ways, their relationship never should have worked out.

**Sarah:** In all honesty, I didn't see him as a man at first. I'm sorry, but that's the truth, and he knew that.

[normal music]

**Anna:** So, Rayan and Samih met in a journalism workshop in Shatila camp. And Rayan was 20 years. She was pursuing her journalism studies, and she was decidedly a young woman. Samih was 17 years old. He just left Syria very recently.

[people talking in the background]

**Sarah:** He was very young without any heart.

**Female:** [laughs]

**John:** Stop.

**Anna:** She was like, “No, you don't understand. He was like a child.” [laughs] And then he has this little goatee, and he strokes it.

**Sarah:** He hung out with his friends, who were also Palestinians from Syria.

**Anna:** Samih is Palestinian, but he grew up in Syria. And then, of course, with the Syrian civil war, his family had to leave to Lebanon, because Shatila was already an overcrowded camp. And with Syrian-Palestinians who are now pushed out by the Syrian civil war, it was only becoming more and more crowded. So, there were tensions. Rayan could imagine what her father might say if he found out she was dating someone like Samih.

**Sarah:** “How will you register your kids? He's Syrian-Palestinian, and you're Lebanese-Palestinian. What will your legal status be? What will he do for work? Where will you live? Who will pay the rents? Who's going to hire him?”

**John:** So, for her, it was an impossibility to even consider it.

**Anna:** But nevertheless, they kept getting to know each other. They filmed videos together of daily life in the camp, they painted the streets together. Of course, Samih kept falling a little bit more in love with Rayan every day. Rayan kept being confused about whether or not he liked her when he wasn't being explicit with his feelings. But then, during Ramadan, everything changes.

**Sarah:** It was the Night of Power.

**John:** That's right. It was the Night of Power.

**Anna:** So, Laylat-al-Qadr translates to the Night of Power in English. It's thought of as the time when God revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. So, it's said that this is the period of time when your prayers are the most powerful, when you're the most spiritually connected.

**John:** She told me to go with her.

**Sarah:** We would go pray together that night.

**Anna:** So, they're both in the mosque on Laylat al-Qadr, and Rayan is praying in the women's section, Samih in the men's section.

**Sarah:** On the Night of Power, he kept praying, "Oh, God, please make it work."

**Anna:** At this point, Rayan is realizing that she needs to set Samih free.

**Sarah:** And I decided that I couldn't keep tormenting him.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** When we return, when you be suspected, expect it. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Photo Session episode. When last we left, Rayan had decided to tell Samih, “Forget your little crush on me. It ain't happening.” Snap Judgment.

**Anna:** She's preparing that she's going to see him and look him in the eye and say, “Samih, I love you as my friend, but that's all that we're ever going to be.”

**Sarah:** And I told him that we should talk.

**Anna:** They decided to meet at a cafe that they liked near the sea in Beirut.

**Sarah:** He knew that I wanted to put an end to everything.

**Anna:** She's preparing to let him down as easy as she possibly can.

**Sarah:** He was fiddling with his keys, looking away from me. I felt a lot of-- I saw a vulnerability that I'd never seen in a man before.

**Anna:** She's struck by just how soft and vulnerable he seemed, and instead of seeing that as a weakness.

**Sarah:** Ifelt that I could step into his eyes and all the way to his heart.

**Anna:** Something within her shifted. Maybe he wasn't just the impish boy who was crushing on her.

**Sarah:** If he's able to be so vulnerable with me, and yes, he's strong. But no matter how strong he thinks he is, he's able to be like this with me. I mean, he's willing to lose everything, give up on this whole idea of what it means to be a man, and the way that society looks at men and now even the way that I look at him. You know what I mean?

**Anna:** She just felt so connected to him.

**Sarah:** I needed to respect his vulnerability, because I thought that one day, it would bring me strength. He's showing me this because he loves me. So, when I looked at him, I said, “Samih, I made a decision. We are going to be together, no matter what.”

**John:** “You said this? I did not believe you.”

**Anna:** Sami was overjoyed, except he also thought she was kidding.

**John:** I thought she was just saying anything to make me go away.

**Anna:** That's the moment that it started. That's the moment that their tumultuous friendship finally was able to become a relationship. They were getting very serious very quickly, and quickly realized that they did want to get engaged, that they did want to spend the rest of their lives together. And for them, this meant celebrating an engagement in a traditional style. And of course, doing this involves taking photos.

**John:** I was against having this photo session, because I hate that tradition.

**Sarah:** He didn't have any faith in this idea and he started saying, "I don't get what this is all about. I don't get why we would have our photos taken here. We'll be a laughingstock." That's what he said to me.

**Anna:** Samih was afraid that if they took their pictures in the camp, people would say, “Why are you celebrating your engagement in this ugly place, where wires are hanging from the buildings that are almost falling down, where people are poor and it's so decrepit?” In fact, Samih would always remember, when he first came to the camp and his first thoughts were, take me back to Syria.

**Sarah:** So, we kept fighting, and I kept insisting and I said, “This is what I want.”

**Anna:** Rayanis a very difficult person to say no to.

**Samih:** Okay.

**Sarah:** What's important to me is that I love this place, and there's an incredibly strong connection tying me here.

**Anna:** One afternoon, they went out with a friend to take their engagement photos. Samih was wearing a smart suit jacket, and Rayan was wearing a beautiful floor length grey gown with intricate beading on the bodice and a navy-blue headscarf. They started in the square, where they ate lunch every day together, posing next to some of the houses. Next, Rayan jumped inside of a tuk-tuk, a sort of three wheeled cart that can drive through the camp. And Samih got behind her, making faces and smiling behind the steering wheel.

One of the photos, Samih is posing next to a poem that's written in Arabic in red paint on just one of the walls in the camp. And the poem is from the very famous Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish.

[Samih talking in Arabic]

**Anna:** And it says, "And we have our small dreams like we wake up cured of disappointment. We do not dream of insurmountable things. We are alive, we survive and we dream on."

[intriguing music]

**Anna:** The very last photo was on the rooftop in the camp, a place where Samih had gone during one of their many fights. They're looking out over the city. The sun is setting over the buildings of Beirut, and they just look so absolutely happy to be together.

**Anna:** They got home from doing the photos, upload the pictures to Facebook.

**John:** And then the power went out like it does. And it was out for a while.

**Anna:** They’re lighting the candles and sitting around and waiting. They're starting to get a little bit nervous about what people are going to say. Even Rayan, who, this was her idea in the first place--

**Sarah:** I was so scared my friends would think that Samih was too young or that he's a Palestinian from Syria.

**Anna:** What will people think of her and Samih? What will people think of the fact that they took their photos of the camp?

**John:** And when the power came back on, we opened up Facebook and--

**Anna:** Everyone they knew was liking, sharing, commenting.

**Sarah:** Yeah, basically, everyone we know.

**Anna:** Like, not just their friends, but also everyone in the camp.

**Rayan:** For example, I have like 100 friends. All my friends, they shared it. All my friends on Facebook.

**Anna:** It's not like Samih was afraid of all that people are laughing at them. No, that people are really excited, saying, “Congratulations, we're so happy for you. Look at the two lovebirds of Shatila. I can't believe you showed the camp like this.”

**Rayan:** But then spread everywhere.

**Anna:** And then it just started to go completely viral.

[crosstalk]

**Anna:** It got picked up by international media. It got picked up by Al Jazeera plus.

[laughter, and Samih Speaking Arabic]

**Anna:** They were getting calls from people who wanted to interview the couple who had taken their engagement photos in Shatila.

**Sarah:** We were in shock.

**John:** I never imagined that anyone would want to share our photos. Why would they?

**Anna:** And the next day, as they were walking in the street, arm in arm, no longer wearing their fancy clothes but wearing sweatshirts and jeans instead.

**John:** The entire camp was celebrating with us. They came out on the balconies, ululating.

**Sarah:** They showered us with rice.

**John:** Everybody was so happy.

**Anna:** And it was all because they took these photos and showed that love can even blossom in Shatila.

**Sarah:** I just wanted them for us. So, one day, if we have kids, maybe there won't be a camp here, or maybe we won't live here, but we will still have these memories of where we fell in love.

**Rayan:** I’m glad for this place.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Two years after their engagement, Rayan and Samih got married. They moved to a flat just outside the camp, and they still worked there as journalists. Super congratulations. Our storyteller Anna and her boyfriend Salem, they got engaged shortly after she moved to Iraq to be with him.

**Anna:** Then he pushes a red box across the table. And I opened it up, and it was a ring. I slid it on my finger, my ring finger, and it was a little bit big, but then I put it on my middle finger and it fit perfectly. It felt like a way to give the finger to a world that was trying to keep us apart. It's still there to this day on my middle finger.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** You can read these two stories and many more in Anna Lekas Miller's book, *Love Across Borders*, with a link on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

Our voice actors were John Fecile and Sarah Fecile, a real-life married couple. And we've got the tape to prove it.

**Sarah:** He hung out with his friends, who are also Palestinians from Syria.

**John:** Okay. Fine.

**Sarah:** What do you want?

**John:** Just try it one more time.

**Glynn:**  The original score by Clay Xavier. The translation by Naziha Baassiri. The story was produced by John Fecile.

Now, when we return, producer, John Fecile, has one more story about viral photos and marriage proposals. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Photo Session episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And up next, producer, John Fecile, has got another story for us about photos on the internet with a very different twist on the word love. Snap Judgment.

**John:** What you're about to hear, it's me and my friend, Esther Honig. Esther is a journalist. She's done a couple of Snap Judgment episodes. And while I was making the story, you just heard about Samih and Rayan and their engagement photos, I kept thinking about this thing that Esther had done that changed her life, but we've never really talked about it. So, I took this opportunity to ask her to tell me the story.

[intriguing music]

**Esther:** I, after college, had big plans of like, what I was going to do? I got an internship at the local NPR membership station. But mind you, I'm living with my sister in her spare bedroom. I'm not earning pay check. I don't have any way to pay rent. I'm completely broke.

My sister knows a lot of people in Kansas City. There's this job opportunity she heard about, and she basically presents me to this man who has a startup. I was 24 years, and they needed a social media marketer. No one really knew what that meant, but he was like, "I'll pay you $500 in cash every week under the table."

**John:** [laughs]

**Esther:** [giggles] And I was like, “This is the best offer I've ever had.” So, I jumped at it. There was literally four of us that worked at this company, and maybe one person who actually knew what they were doing. [phone ringing] And so much of the work that we're doing is being outsourced. There was like this website called Fiverr, where you could hire people from all over the world, and you could pay them $5 to complete a task, like a digital task.

You could pay them to create a little video for you or create a graphic for you. And so, I'm on Fiverr one morning, and somehow, I come across this page of Photoshoppers, like people who you can hire to do Photoshop your photo for you, and they're all promising to make you look more beautiful. I just thought that was really funny. It just stuck in my head, and I kept thinking about it, and that's when I came up with this idea of like, “Wouldn't it be funny if I sent my photo to one of these Photoshoppers to see what they would give me back?”

**John:** Yeah. So, tell me about the original photo that you took. And how did that come about?

**Esther:** It was a friend of my sister who's a photographer, and he had me sit in front of some background that he had. He was like, “You want a portrait? No problem.” I put my hair up in a sloppy bun. I just tucked down my tank top or whatever under my armpits so that, yeah, you could see my shoulders. I'm not wearing any makeup. I was going to say, like, when I was a little kid, they had these Barbie, like these busts of Barbie, and she doesn't have any makeup on, and her hair is just down at her shoulders. The whole point was that you could put makeup on her, do her hair, that's kind of the idea was like, “I wanted the Photoshoppers to have a blank canvas, so that they could just go hog wild.”

The message I had sent along was like, "I want you to edit this photo to however you want. Like, I want you to make me look beautiful, but it's completely your discretion, what you think that means.” A lot of people were really insistent that I know I was already beautiful. They really wanted to, I guess, give me a confidence boost, which is just so kind of them. So, the first photo I got back was from Sri Lanka. They had made my skin really pale, and I had turquoise eyeshadow and pink cheeks.

**John:** I don't know if you have like a link where I can look at them while we're talking.

**Esther:** Is it okay if I pull it up and then send it to you?

**John:** Yeah. Yeah, for sure. Yeah, drop it in the chat when you got. Got it.

**Esther:** Ooh, this is hard to look at.

**John:** [laughs]

**Esther:** Oh.

**John:** So, the Argentina one, talk about that one.

**Esther:** They've made me look thinner somehow. Like, I'm elongated. I have on a ton of makeup. I want to say I probably hired close to 50 or 45 people. Bulgaria, that one looks a little cold and steely to me. [kissing] The eyes are a little hollow and I'm like this.

**John:** It's very soviet.

**Esther:** Yeah. Or, some propaganda for-- People really went hard in some of these images. So, I got this one back from the Philippines.

**John:** Luscious locks.

**Esther:** I have tons of hair. [John chuckles] I'm standing in the-- Some of the photos I got back, people put clothes on me. This one's from Morocco. Well, first off, they've put me in a hijab.

**John:** It's a nice-looking hijab.

**Esther:** Yeah, like the colour-- Uh-huh, I got something in purple and turquoise. I think what's interesting about some of these is that it's really subtle, the changes.

**John:** Okay. Talk about the Israel photo.

**Esther:** They made me tanner. My lips are slightly bigger. My eyebrow, one of them looks like it's been filled in a bit.

**John:** Which one do you think was the weirdest?

**Esther:** The picture from the US is by far the most messed up. The last one is actually from the US.

**John:** This person's definitely messing with you.

**Esther:** You think so? [laughs]

**John:** You look like, I don't know--

**Esther:** I look like a Bratz doll. I have a shrunken head. He took the lower part of my face, and he pasted my lips up to where my nose was. My eyeballs are huge and my hair is blonde.

**John:** If I saw a person like this walking down the street, I would be concerned.

**Esther:** Iwould scream.

**John:** [laughs]

**Esther:** I'd be like, “Where did you go for this horrendous plastic surgery?”

**John:** [laughs]

**Esther:** The first thing I do with these pictures is I create a website. I've never really been published, but I wanted to be a journalist, and Buzzfeed was really big at the time. This is 2014. And so, what I do is I email Buzzfeed, and I'm like, “I did this weird thing. I have all these images. I was just putting it out there to see what the response would be.” I hear back from them immediately in a day, so Buzzfeed publishes this, and then immediately, I start getting more requests to republish it. I remember the second one was from Cosmopolitan magazine, and that's when everything just went absolutely nuts.

**CNN Journalist:** What exactly is beautiful? One journalist posed that question to people in 25 countries around the world.

**John:** I found the CNN clip.

**Esther:** Oh, God. Hi, Jonathan. Thank you for having me. And everyone wanted to pick it up.

**Female Speaker:** What is beauty defined, anyway?

**Esther:** NPR, Time magazine, The London Sunday Times.

**Female Speaker 2:** Hi, to all the readers at Poland’s Focus.

**Esther:** It was just a tidal wave.

**Female Speaker 3:** Esther Honig is a 24-year-old journalist currently living in Kansas City, Missouri.

**Esther:** I was at the coffee shop, and people were whispering behind me. And I turned around and they were like, "You're that girl, right?"

**Male Speaker:** All this attention to your face, does it make you feel a little more self-conscious when you look in the mirror every morning?

**Esther:** It was shocking, but it was also like-- It felt like I'd really accomplished something. Whatever this is, whatever it means, this is my moment. And so, I email my boss and I explain to him as best I can what's happening, and that I can't come to work because this is my priority. Because I want to be a journalist. They're referring to me as a journalist. It was a ton of pressure. I just graduated college. I had no experience doing any of this.

**Male Speaker:** Any big conclusions we should draw from this? The obvious one is there seems to be some creeping racism moving around the world about how people look at the pigment of your skin.

**Esther:** I think that that is a concept of globalization and something that people have been studying. And so, I'm terrified of every word that's coming out of my mouth, because I don't want to say the wrong thing. You just didn't know how things were going to be interpreted. Like, was I going to be a laughingstock or was I going to be a racist or like an idiot? It's like, you put yourself out there, you make yourself so vulnerable. But it's not just one or two people. You have millions of people literally looking at what you're doing. I was just glued to my laptop. Like, all I need to exist is a Wi-Fi connection, and my laptop and my phone. I was so on edge, like I couldn't relax.

So, I'm not sleeping. I'm getting maybe like four hours of sleep at best. I'm waking up in panic attacks. I'm not showering. I wasn't eating very much. There were so many messages in my email, on my Facebook Messenger that had just completely clogged up my-- There was at one point when I couldn't get any more messages on Facebook, because there were so many, like hundreds.

**John:** Why did you try to answer them all? Were you trying to answer them all?

**Esther:** No, I was only trying to answer the media questions.

**John:** But that involved like waiting through a bunch.

**Esther:** Right. And probably, 70% of that was just these idiot men reaching out to me to tell me that first, like, I already was beautiful. I was getting these long messages of telling me how I was already beautiful and how I didn't need any change and I was already perfect. And then I had people proposing marriage to me. I remember there was someone who wanted-- He wrote this long letter about how he thought he was in love with me. That was also in there, and that was so incredibly obnoxious.

I continued to get those messages for years. It was miserable. By the way, also, Chase, at the time, my boyfriend, he was helping me go through some of these messages and seeing some of these men who are telling me that they're in love with me. He was like, “Delete, delete, delete.” It may have been two weeks. It might have been two and a half weeks, things had started to calm down. It's not interview after interview. I'm not getting called into Al Jazeera and Good Morning America. It's more manageable.

And so, I show back up at work. I think I might have been there for a morning or maybe a few hours. So, my boss pulls me aside and he's like, “Give me back the computer. [John chuckles] You're gone. You don't work here anymore.” The irony is that I lost that job, and so what did I have to go back to, but journalism. It forced me in a way to take a go at this or make a go of it.

**John:** Do you want to go viral again?

**Esther:** I absolutely 100% never want to go viral again. I don't even think that that could happen again. I don't think social media functions in the same way. If something goes viral, it doesn't wind up on the news anymore. It would be a different experience, but I still don't want it. I don't want to go viral again ever.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Esther Honing's photo project still gets republished to this day. It's appeared in books for English language learners, and the University of Cambridge put it in a textbook chapter about beauty. Her photos have been printed and hung on the walls of the Museum of Tomorrow in Brazil, and the National Science and Media Museum in the UK.

She's currently a producer at StoryCorps, but has also found time to produce two Snap episodes, White Gold Fever and Map to the Disappeared. They're available at *snapjudgment.org.* And last but not least, Esther and her husband, Chase, just celebrated the birth of their baby girl. Congrats to the happy family. Now you don't need photoshop to make that beautiful. The original score was by Dirk Schwartzhoff. The story is produced by John Fecile

Now, our next story goes to show that if you have something to tell someone, tell them now.

KUOW reporter Liz Jones takes it from here.

[upbeat music]

**Liz:** My friend, Ben, he's known he was gay since about the 7th grade. He says although he came out to almost everyone in his life early on, he put off telling his parents for a long time.

**Ben:** So, growing up, there were always times that my mom would ask me, “So, when are you going to get married?” I would never know when it was coming, but it would come up all the time. “Just when are you going to get married? When are you going to have kids? Do you have a girlfriend yet?” I would just try to change the subject saying, “I only want to talk about it.”

**Liz:** This is actually from an interview I conducted with Ben nine years ago. So, you have to remember that back then there was no gay marriage. That still seemed like a long way off. And Ben, he just didn't want to break his mom's heart. He'd planned to tell his parents in college, but then his mom's health took a bad turn. She developed a brain aneurysm. Went blind for six months. Had heart trouble and needed a pacemaker. It just never seemed like the right time.

**Ben:** So, another year would go by and another year would go by. It was getting to be ridiculous, because I was in my 30s at this point and I just wasn't that kind of person. I think it was a disappointment myself. It's like, "Gosh, you just have to do it. You just have to get it over with and not have this hanging over your head."

**Liz:** Finally, one New Year's, he was at his parents’ house hanging out with his mom in the kitchen, and she asked the same question that she always asked.

**Ben:** She just asked me, "Junior, when are you going to get married?" And so, finally, I was just like, “You know what? I'm just going to tell.” You know, I said, “Mom, I'm never going to get married because gay." And she starts laughing and after that she goes, "Ha-ha-ha, very funny. You're not gay." I'm like, "Mom, I'm gay." Then she just gets this really perplexed look, almost pissed at me, maybe. And then so we got into this little not quite a fight, but just more of an argument. I could just see her disappointment.

But I definitely felt a big weight off my shoulders on my list of huge things I needed accomplished in my life. That was a huge checkmark that I was able to take off to finally come out to my parents and to be completely out.

**Liz:** After that, although Ben's dad was fairly accepting, his mom just didn't really talk about it. But Ben figured that's okay. He'd done his part, and now she was processing.

**Ben:** I guess it was about a year and a half later, my sister had gotten engaged. We were at an engagement party. And at that point, my mom looks at me and she's like, "When are you going to get married?" At first, I was like, “Oh, she's joking.” I'm like, "Come on, mom, you know I'm not going to get married." And then she's like, "Why? What do you mean?" And I'm like, "Mom, I'm gay, and you know this." Then I saw that little look on her face turn to more confusion, like, “You're gay?” I was like, "Oh, my God, she does not remember." She had some short-term memory issues, but I was like, “There's just no way that she can't remember this about me.” It was just that whole feeling, a little bit of shame came out again. And so, it was a bit of a shock that I had to go through it again.

**Liz:** So, after the second time, do you feel like now she finally gets it?

**Ben:** I think at that point, I was just like, “I'm going to just have to remind her again, and this will become part of her memory now.” But I think in the back of my head, I just could tell by the way she was looking at me, the way she was talking about it that she still maybe did not grasp it 100%.

**Liz:** Six months pass, and it's another New Year. Ben and his family are at the Buddhist temple where they go every New Year's Day to chant their resolutions.

**Ben:** It's this whole group of probably 500 people or so chanting over and over. And then my mom just sitting there, she's like, "When are you going to get married?" And I was like, “Oh, no. Not right now.” And she is like, "You just need to find the right girl. I'm going to chant for you." And I'm like, "I'm going to chant that you understand."

**Liz:** That night, Ben went to his sister, his dad, and had an emergency family gathering. There must be a way they figured to get his mom to remember.

**Ben:** So, that's why we came up with this game plan for my dad to talk about. My sister told my dad, “I want you to every night before you go to bed just say, junior's gay,” which we thought was really funny, because we didn't know if he would do it or not. When we were just imagining my mom and my dad laying there in their bed and like saying, “Good night. Junior's gay.” Maybe it would sink into her subconscious while she was sleeping. So, we had all these plans where we just need to talk about it more. You come home, when you go visit them and say, "Hey, mommy, dad, I'm gay."

**Liz:** But it turned out the fourth time wasn't the one that would make her finally understand, neither was the fifth or the sixth.

**Ben:** Itgot to the point where it was just comical, because the same scenario has happened time and time again. [chuckles] She would ask in the morning, maybe at breakfast, and then it wasn't unlikely for it to happen again in the afternoon. Like, “Mom, we just talked about it this morning.” It's like, what did we say?

**Liz:** Wait, so how many times had this happen?

**Ben:** At this point, I don't even know. My brother has a three-year old son. We just had the birthday at some big chain restaurant, and we're sitting there with all these kids, and I could just see the look in her eye that it's coming, because she starts looking at me, looking at the kids. So, I'm trying to talk about everything and anything else other than marriage. We're making it through the birthday cake, and there she goes, there she goes, "When are you going to get married?"

**Liz:** So, are you feeling like she can't get it because of her memory problems or because she doesn't want to get it?

**Ben:** Yeah, I definitely think there must be this emotional block. There's a part of her that just doesn't really want to believe it. Even though she sees me as a happy person every day, she thinks, in my life, I probably truly can't be happy unless I'm married to a woman and I just have this family. So, the novelty of it has worn off, definitely. Whereas before, it's gone run the gamut of frustration to anger to sadness to just being a hilarious story that it would tell to now it's just, I'm just tired of talking about it, kind of. Now, it's like, “Mom, come on, at this point, you have to know it's been 10 times or it's been 15 times that we've had this conversation and I know you must know.”

When I was younger, I was almost angry at her for deserting. I was like "Where's my real mom?" I'm like, "Gosh, my old mom would give me a hug and say she understood and support me with it. But now you don't understand."

**Liz:** Ben told me that because of this, sometimes he found it easier to not come out at all, to stay in the closet, at least for that day.

**Ben:** Sometimes it would be, when we were at the hospital when my dad was going through chemo from his cancer, and she would bring it up with all her sincerity. I didn't want to hear it because it was like horrible timing. It would be like, "Yeah, mom. Yup, I'm going to get married, have a baby," and head off the question as soon as I could.

**Liz:** However, this may sound, Ben and his mom are really close. They have this great connection. I went with them one day to the supermarket. They joke around a lot as they're shopping. [Ben laughs] Ben's mom leans on his arm as she walks.

**Ben:** Can you say that?

**Ben's Mother:** Yeah.

**Ben:** Are you sure? [laughs]

**Liz:** Sitting in the car afterwards, Ben mentions his sister's pregnancy. We both look at his mom and wait. We knew he was setting her up. Without missing a beat, she turns to him and says she wants him to get married.

**Ben's Mom:** Ah, so nice.

[laughter]

**Liz:** Ben's my friend, and I've heard him imitate his mom saying this dozens of times at parties. But watching it happen, it just seems sad. He patiently explains while his mom shakes her head. And after a while, she starts to cry a little. She stares out the window, away from him. He slaps her on the leg.

**Ben's Mom:** Why are you irritating me? [Ben laughs] You want to make me cry? [laughs] Just be back to normal.

[laughter]

**Ben:** It is. It's my normal.

**Ben's Mom:** That's not normal.

**Ben:** No. Everyone has their own normal, mom. It's not the same, but you always told me to be proud of our differences. It's not like, see, you know it's not like I chose. There's no way that anyone would choose this. You know that. To choose it to have your parents not want to accept you, why would you choose that? There's no reason, right? All right, now kiss. Thank you.

I've actually had dreams of my mom before she was sick. It's not necessarily like we're talking about this subject. But in one dream that I've had, I was with a boyfriend and she was driving us somewhere in our old Chevy Malibu that we had. It was great. We were just driving. I don't even know where we were driving to Kmart or somewhere where we used to always go as kids. But I just remember being with this guy that I don't remember what he'd look like, I wish I did. She was just driving just talking like everything was normal, “Fine, it was no big deal.” And she would know, you know, my son's gay. I could skip all this trouble of having to come out numerous, endless times.

**Liz:** When I first interviewed Ben, I wondered if this was it for him, this one act play with his mom, a play that would never close. But like I said, that was nine years ago. And recently, I got a chance to catch up with both of them at her house in Seattle.

**Paul:** Are you ready to eat?

**Ben's Mom:** It's my favourite.

[laughter]

**Paul:** You're always up for a meal, right?

**Ben's Mom:** All the time.

**Liz:** That second guy you hear, that's Paul. He's Ben's partner. They met right after our first interview. And this is their weekly family dinner with Ben's mom.

**Paul:** I make pickles, borscht, and lasagna. [laughs]

**Ben's Mom:** It’s been one time.

[laughter]

**Liz:** Ben's father passed away a few years ago, and his mom is a lot slower than she used to be. But looking at Paul sitting at the table, laughing and joking with her, it's almost like this is what crumbled her memory block. Having Paul around all the time as a friendly reminder that her son is gay, she gets it.

**Ben:** And yeah, so, we've been together now for eight years. My mom really cares for him as well. Thinks he's a great guy. Hug and kiss every time she sees him.

**Paul:** We just did a birthday dinner for Ben.

**Ben's Mom:** Oh, yeah. [laughs]

**Ben:** 47 years. [laughs]

**Ben's Mom:** Mamma mia, 47 years. For me, always he's a 15-years old.

[laughter]

**Ben:** Over the time, she would still say, "You need to find a wife." She would still say it and I'd be like, "Mom, I have Paul" in the first couple years. But just recently, I'd say in the last year or two, it turned from, "When are you going to get married to only when are you going to give me a mago? When are you going to give me a grandchild, a baby?" When I finally said, “Mom, you know that I'm with Paul,” she was like, "I know, but you could still have a mago."

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Big love from Snap. We hope everything works out. Now, the sound design for that piece was by Renzo Gorrio, original sound design. And that story is produced by Liz Jones in partnership with our good friends at KUOW. Liz originally edited that tape together years ago with Sarah Koenig. When Sarah worked at This American Life, it took a while. But we're glad it finally came out.

What is love? Baby, don't hurt me, don't hurt me. No more. [laughs] I'm kidding, I'm kidding. I'll tell you what love is. Love is a story. How do you spread love? By sharing this story. Give someone you love a taste of Snap, *Snapjudgment.org.* Snap is brought to you by the team that gently, softly whispers sweet nothings in their lover's ear. Except, of course, the uber producer, Mark Ristich. Mark shouts at the top of his lungs. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, Bo Walsh, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé, Regina Bediako.

My name is Glynn Washington, and this is not the news. And this, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, drunken, hour after hour romcoms, you could stagger over to the arrivals gate at the airport to see if true love as portrayed in the movies really exists. And when you finally see a couple, rarely approach each other, even though she doesn't look much like Meg Ryan and he doesn't appear to be Billy Crystal, take silence in the fact that you are still not as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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