[Snap Judgement intro]

**Glynn Washington:** Funerals, memorials can be wrenching. Sad affairs, as we come to grip the reality of loss. But it's also true that memorials can be healing, uplifting, even joyful gathering in community to pay respects.

I recently attended the funeral of the beloved auntie, joining hundreds of people, friends, family I haven't seen in decades, some I've never seen at all, to celebrate and mourn this great woman with song, praise, weeping, laughing, ushering her to that final rest. And I know it sounds odd to say that a funeral was wonderful, but this funeral was wonderful. She was loved, and her final gift was her own ceremony because this alchemy of mourning and joy and release, it cast a spell, giving permission at long last for the stories to come out. People finally started talking stories kept secret for generations. Stories I didn't know. Funny stories, ridiculous tales, but also stories of hurt, shame.

And almost all those stories are really stories about my grandfather, he who shall not be named, a person I've never met. See, papa was a rolling stone. No one, nobody can give the definitive count on just how many offspring that man had or how many children he abandoned. His children and his children's children left to struggle as best they could. But we all kind of have that look. While walking down the street minding my own business, I can see a person I've never met before in this life, and without a word, we both throw our arms wide for the embrace. Cousin. And that hug, it's a survivor's hug, like a whisper saying, "I know, I know."

At my auntie's funeral, hearing those stories said aloud for the first time, it felt like a choir and enveloping saying, "We know."

[upbeat music]

Today on Snap Judgment, we're going on a very different journey for a very different family. We're calling it Seeking Shizuko. My name is Glynn Washington, and please don't you dare wait to bring me my flowers, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

Now, we begin in California's Central Valley where David Masumoto, everyone calls him Mas where he lives. Mas comes from a long line of people who worked the land, in Japan first and then in the Central Valley. And Mas knows this land like the back of his hand. But then, Mas learned there was one piece missing. Reporter, Lisa Morehouse, tells us the story.

[soothing music]

**Mas:** We were in the Spring Lady peaches. There's six rows of that. Six rows of nectarines that bloomed a little earlier. And then, back here are four rows of apricots. So, these trees are like an old growth forest. They're 60 years old, and no one keeps an orchard for 60 years, but they're still producing wonderfully.

**Lisa Morehouse:** When he was a teenager, Mas planted these peaches with his father.

**Mas:** When you plant something with someone, and in this case, with my father, literally, our fingerprints are on this. And yet, new growth, and this is what I love about this, new growth is coming to fill it. So, his spirit, his ghost, is with me in the fields. And I've walked these fields with my grandmother. It's as if I could still walk with her ghost, and we walk in silence together. I grew up as a Buddhist. So, I didn't grow up with this idea of a heaven and hell. It was more like, no, there are just life around you, spirits around you, ancestors around you. And that's how I interpreted ghosts. They keep me company.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas knows the rhythms here, rhythms of farming, of family and of history. And he thought he knew all of his family history until one day in 2012.

**Mas:** It was a winter day. I wake up fairly early, 5 or 6 o'clock. House is quiet. I make myself a cup of coffee and maybe do some writing or something.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Then, he headed out to the orchards. Winter is the season for pruning fruit trees.

**Mas:** It's nice, foggy, quiet. And fog really dampens all the sound. And I like that because you are kind of into some solitary world of yourself.

**Lisa Morehouse:** When he came back to the house, he saw he had a phone message.

**Mas:** We still had answering machines. I remember seeing this light go on that you had a message for you. So, I played the message, and it was this woman from this funeral home.

**Lisa Morehouse:** He assumed it was a solicitation call.

**Mas:** And the first thought, because I remember looking at my hands and thinking, "I'm not that old. Why am I planning my funeral?" And I go, "I'm not that old," so I ignore it. I almost erased the message.

**Lisa Morehouse:** But he didn't erase it. Something the woman said was needling him.

**Mas:** Her first line was something like, "Is your mom Carol Sugimoto Masamoto?" And I remember thinking, "How did she know my mom's maiden name?"

**Lisa Morehouse:** So, after a few days, he called the funeral home on his push button phone.

**Mas:** So, I'm pressing the button going [dialing sounds] and thinking, "All right, I'm going to be pretty systematic saying, 'I don't understand what this is about. I'm not interested in a funeral. I'm not interested in planning anything. But how did you know my mom's name'?"

**Lisa Morehouse:** But he was disarmed by the woman on the other end of the line. Her name was Renee Johnson, and her family owned the funeral home.

**Mas:** Very, very sweet woman. Very kind woman.

**Lisa Morehouse:** She told him she'd found his mom's name in his father's obituary. Mas had written that just a couple years earlier and had almost omitted his mom's maiden name.

**Mas:** And I thought, "Why am I putting in the maiden name?" And I do remember thinking, you know have to pay for this obituary by word count, I could save a few cents by leaving out that name. But I said, "No, it's tradition, you put it in."

**Lisa Morehouse:** And that's how Renee found him.

**Mas:** She said, "I want to let you know that your mom's sister, Shizuko, is in a hospice program."

**Lisa Morehouse:** She said Shizuko was 90 years old and had just suffered a stroke.

**Mas:** "I just want to make sure she doesn't die alone." And I said no. And I remember closing my eyes, thinking, "I think this woman is wrong, because I know my family." And I remember repeating that in my head, "I know my family. This just can't be right."

**Lisa Morehouse:** Every year, Mas' family would go to the Mausoleum in Fresno on Memorial Day to pay respects to all the Sugimotos whose ashes were placed there.

**Mas:** And then, there'd be these other Sugimoto names of children that died in infant mortality, and I never knew who they were. And we'd go in and bow to them. And we'd play these games. How many aunts and uncles can you name? Never was Shizuko mentioned. There was virtually no-- no, there was no family record of her at all.

After I hung up the phone, I was in shock. I wanted to immediately run to my mom and say, "Mom, I got this call." And I go, "I can't do that."

**Lisa Morehouse:** So, he asked his wife and grown children.

**Mas:** "What do I do with this?" And they said, "Well, maybe you should follow up to see if it's true."

**Lisa Morehouse:** If it was true, that would mean Mas had a lost aunt, a woman he never knew existed, who lived in a care home just a few miles away from his farm. But his first stop would be to visit Renee at her funeral home in Fresno. He thought it would give him some clarity.

**Mas:** And I remember trying to, in the back of my mind, thinking, "So, do I need to be skeptical? Do I need to be open and say, 'Oh, this is so great?'"

[vehicle starts]

**Lisa Morehouse:** He drove past raisin crops and orchards filled with olives and peaches and then onto the freeway. And as he pulled up to the funeral home, in his mind, he was sure of one thing.

**Mas:** It'll all becleared up in an hour. It was an old mansion that someone had built a hundred years ago, and they had now converted it over into a funeral home. So, I felt very comfortable going in there, because you're actually walking into someone's home.

**Lisa Morehouse:** He walked up a grand staircase to meet Renee.

**Mas:** She's a tiny, gentle woman. She sat down, showed me the 1930 census, and I went, "My gosh." You could see these names. First one was Masao Sugimoto and Lorada Sugimoto, my oldest aunt. And then came Teruo, then it was Takashi, George, and then my mom as the youngest.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Among all these names, Shizuko Sugimoto, born October 13th, 1919, seven years before his mom. As Mas stared at the census, Renee explained that Shizuko had been a ward of the state since 1942, that the government had set aside little sums of money for decades so that when she eventually died, she wouldn't be buried in a pauper's cemetery. Renee's funeral home got the contract for these last rights.

**Mas:** And Renee had this golden heart of not wanting this person to die alone. That's why she didn't have to look up in the 1930s census to try to find family of Shizuko. She didn't have to go through all those extra expenses. That's not written in the contract that they had, but she did. She wanted to see if she could find family for Shizuko. This is so intense. And I remember sitting there almost shaking because I can't believe all these forces that had to come together for me to be right at that spot.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas got the information for Shizuko's care home, thanked Renee and left.

**Mas:** And I remember getting in my car, taking a deep breath and thinking, "Should I go right now to see Shizuko?"

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas knew that she was in hospice just down the road and that she might die alone soon.

**Mas:** And I didn't because this is just too much at one time. I needed to go home and process this a little bit more. There aren't a lot of facts because there's a lot of blank spots here, but that doesn't mean Shizuko didn't exist. Immigrants have history, but it's often not documented. My grandparents were illiterate, they didn't write, meaning there was no written history of them. But that doesn't mean they didn't exist. So, I thought about that when I was thinking of Shizuko. Just because we didn't have photographs, we didn't have documents, we didn't have letters written to her or anything like that, doesn't mean she didn't exist.

**Lisa Morehouse:** And after sleeping on it, Mas felt ready to meet Shizuko.

**Mas:** So I'm driving to this assisted care center, and it's in West Fresno, where a lot of the Japanese American population lived. The Buddhist Church is there. I had travelled through this frequently. It's an older-assisted care facility. No place to park. I park on the street. And as soon as you step in, first thing you smell is a little urine.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas heard unexpected grumbles and cries and saw patients moving slowly down the hallways using walkers and wheelchairs.

**Mas:** I was saying, "Okay, this isn't the really Country Club-like assisted care center." Made me nervous. "Well, how's the care here for her?"

**Lisa Morehouse:** He found the facility's office.

**Mas:** And Isaid, "Hey, I'm here to see Shizuko Sugimoto." And they looked and say, "Shizuko. Oh, you mean Sugi." I went, "Okay, I guess it's Sugi." "Oh, she's down in this room, down the hall." And outside the room, I see the name placard, and it says Sugi. And I say, "I think I'm in the right place." I step into the room, and she had a roommate who was not doing well and was just talking and whining and crying. And then, I turned to Shizuko, Sugi, just laying there quietly curled up, white hair in a little ball because she was in a coma. Just laying there. And I went, "Huh." And I look at her, and it's not "Ahh, she looks like a Sugimoto." No, [chuckles] she was an older Asian woman. And I remember reaching out and touching her hand, and it was warm, but not hot, but not cold. And something about holding her hand made me feel she's real. Did I know for sure everything? No, but I think I found this lost aunt.

**Lisa Morehouse:** At this point, Mas was almost ready to tell his family, almost. He decided to do one more search for records at the Central Valley Regional Center in Fresno.

**Mas:** And the woman there was great because she pulled records, and she actually let me look at some records that technically I wasn't supposed to.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Shizuko had been in different institutions and care homes across the state.

**Mas:** At that point, I said," Shizuko is family. This is my aunt. Now, let me go talk with my mom." That was probably one of the hardest things to do, because how do you tell her that? I started thinking through different approaches, what time of day do I it? What's my spirit? And I said, "Okay, it should be later in the day when she's calm, I'm done with farmwork. It should be just her and me, and I will sit her down."

**Lisa Morehouse:** His mother lived about half a mile away across the orchards.

**Mas:** So, I drove in my old beat-up pickup over there, drove into the yard. Dust is getting kicked up and everything.

**Lisa Morehouse:** They often visited her a few times a day, so Mas showing up wasn't unusual. He went into the house.

**Mas:** And Isaid, "Mom, I need you to sit down." And then, I tried to be serious, but yet not solemn. I said, "Mom, I got something to tell you." And I said, "You remember Aunt Shizuko?" And my mom goes, "Oh, yeah. Aunt Shizuko, she died long ago." And I said, "Take a deep breath, mom. She's alive in Fresno." And there was silence. There was silence. I grew up in a household of long pauses. Because our family were not storytellers. We weren't verbal. We were very, very, very quiet. So, there's this long pause. And then, my mom said, "That can't be." And then, I repeated "Mom, she's alive in Fresno. I saw her a few days ago." And I watched her eyes just kind of wandering because she was running through seven decades of life at that moment.

**Lisa Morehouse:** When he asked if she'd like to visit Shizuko, she just put her head down.

**Mas:** I remember being a little confused, a little disappointed, I guess. It was like, "Oh, I think I solved the family history." And realizing no, I just opened the door. I realized there's so much I don't know.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Why did his mom think Shizuko was dead? When was the last time his mother saw her? Why was she institutionalized? Why had he never heard of this aunt? But he knew his desire to get these answers was probably nothing compared to what his mom might have been feeling.

**Mas:** The next day, I went over to go see and she goes, "I do want to go see Shizuko." So, I said, "All right, let's go this afternoon." And because my mom couldn't hear that well, we drove in silence.

[slow tempo music]

**Lisa Morehouse:** They walked through the halls of the care center until they saw Shizuko's nickname, Sugi, on the door. This time, they were all alone in the room, just Mas, his mom and Shizuko, still comatose, curled up in bed.

**Mas:** And my mom took one look, and she started tearing up. And she grabbed Sugi's hand. And then my mom again, she couldn't hear, but she could speak. She starts talking to Shizuko. She's saying, "Shizuko. This is Carol, this is your [unintelligible 00:19:54]. This is your sister. I'm here, I'm here for you."

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas stood across the hospital bed from his mom.

**Mas:** Up to this point, it was me trying to piece together this story of this lost aunt. Now, it was the story of a lost sister.

**Glynn Washington:** Now that Mas has reunited with his mom and her long-lost sister, will he be able to learn how they became separated in the first place, when Snap Judgment continues.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Seeking Shizuku episode.When last we left, Mas learned he had an aunt that he never knew existed and lived only a few miles away.But now, she's in a coma, and he's just reunited his mother with her long-lost sister. Snap Judgment.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas called his mom's two remaining siblings, George and Lorada, who lived in Los Angeles. He got in touch with cousins. Over the next few weeks, family trekked to Fresno to see Shizuko. Mas decided he was going to learn all he could about the aunt he never knew existed. But he soon found his mom, his aunt and uncle, they were reluctant to talk, and Mas knew he'd have to approach them gently.

**Mas:** Because no one knows the whole story or is willing to tell you the whole story. So, everybody told me slightly different parts of it.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Slowly, Mas started to piece together Shizuko's timeline with a family history he already knew. Shizuko was born just south of Fresno in 1919.

**Mas:** Both of my grandfathers were second sons. They weren't going to inherit the rice field in Japan.

**Lisa Morehouse:** In the early 1900s, they came to California, to the Central Valley.

**Mas:** And they were farm workers. And that's an important distinction.

**Lisa Morehouse:** They were forced to work on other men's farms for low wages. Racist laws kept them from owning property and applying for citizenship. Shizuko was a typical farm girl playing in the fields.

**Mas:** Realized the family was poor, they didn’t have childcare. You would take kids out into the fields with you. I know that because I did that growing up.

**Lisa Morehouse:** When she was five years old, Shizuko got terribly sick. After she came out of her fever, she lost most of her speech. The family never took her to a doctor.

**Mas:** And I kept thinking, "How come they didn't get medical care?" But then, you stop and think, "Oh, wait a minute. I wasn't there." In 1925, they lived in a rural area. They didn't speak English. They were immigrants.

**Lisa Morehouse:** They were Buddhists, and many hospitals were Christian.

**Mas:** There was no healthcare for them.

**Lisa Morehouse:** The family later learned Shizuko had meningitis. Mas' relatives told him she stopped growing intellectually.

**Mas:** I know she never went to school because there weren't special ed programs back then. So, they tried to take care of best they could through the great depression.

**Lisa Morehouse:** From what Mas' mom told him, even though Shizuko couldn't talk, she found ways to communicate.

**Mas:** She grew up afraid of Shizuko, why? Because Shizuko loved to throw things. And my mom was seven years younger, right? So, Shizuko is a 15-year-old, loved to be feisty, as my mom would call it, and pick up things and throw it at my mom, who was an 8-year-old. And my mom was scared of that, I don't blame her. But that was that family dynamic. But she was allowed to be feisty.

**Lisa Morehouse:** But the family couldn't always keep Shizuko safe.

**Mas:** In interviewing my mom, my aunt, my uncle about this, and they were understandably reluctant to say a lot. They didn't know a lot, too.

**Lisa Morehouse:** One day when Shizuko was a teenager, she was home alone, maybe while her family was working in the fields. When they came home, her clothes were torn.

**Mas:** Obviously, Shizuko was upset. My aunt said there were bad neighbor boys. And after what they did to Shizuko, my grandmother cut her hair off so she'd look like a boy.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas doesn't want Shizuko remembered for this assault for one of the worst moments of her life. Luckily, there were stories of what brought Shizuko joy too.

**Mas:** My grandfather was a carpenter, and he made these intricate wooden pagodas and buildings in this little miniature garden.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Shizuko would spend hours there.

**Mas:** My mom used the word, "She'd be lost in the garden." And I love that idea, she would be lost, and that's where she found comfort, I think.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Shizuko would have seen her family and their neighbors doing the traditional folk dance, Tankō Bushi, with dancers moving as if they carried shovels. With his shovel in his hands, Mas demonstrates dipping, turning and reaching.

**Mas:** So, when the music queues up, you would move forward and shovel, shovel, shovel, shovel, stop, pick it up, toss, toss, turn, turn, push, push.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas likes to imagine Shizuko wandering around the miniature pagodas in her father's garden moving like the dancers she'd seen. Shovel, shovel, toss, toss.

**Radio Clip:** Evacuation. More than 100,000 men, women and children, all of Japanese ancestry removed from their homes in the Pacific Coast state to wartime communities established in out of the way places.

**Lisa Morehouse:** But after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Mas's grandfather removed the pagodas, Shizuko stopped wandering in the garden. Within months, the family would be sent to jail. They were assigned to Gila River an Incarceration camp in Arizona.

**Radio Clip:** The entire community bounded by a wire fence and guarded by military police symbols of the military nature of the evacuation.

**Lisa Morehouse:** The family had no idea how long they'd be at Gila River, what the conditions were, if there would be any way to care for someone with special needs.

**Mas:** They had no options. It was a crazy, chaotic time.

**Lisa Morehouse:** So, in desperation, they contacted the local sheriff asking if the state would take care of Shizuko. Mas' aunt, Lorada, told him what she remembered from that day.

**Mas:** My Aunt Shizuko was holding my grandmother, her mom. The sheriff came and pulled them apart. And my aunt realized she's being taken away and started-- she couldn't talk much, but she could say a few words. And she was saying, "Mama, mama." And I think of my grandmother. And her heart was crushed because here she can't take care of this child.

**Lisa Morehouse:** A week later, the family got on the train and was taken to the prison camps at Gila River where they'd have to stay for more than three years.

**Mas:** When they came back from the Arizona desert prison, they were starving.

**Lisa Morehouse:** It was 1945. Mas' mom was 19, and the family was worse off than ever.

**Mas:** They had no work. People treated them like the enemy. They were being spit on. They could not have taken care of Shizuko.

**Lisa Morehouse:** But Shizuko's mother and brother spent years searching for her anyway.

**Mas:** They locate Shizuko in a mental hospital and one of those big ones that had thousands of patients. Saw her and the word was that they said at least she's being fed. She's being taken care of. So maybe she's better off there because we can't take care of her because we're struggling just to feed ourselves here.

**Lisa Morehouse:** The family never spoke of Shizuko again. So, Masa's mom, the youngest, assumed her sister had died.

**Mas:** When I started piecing all this story together, I started getting angry. Angry at decisions that were made. Angry at alien land laws, angry at internment.

**Lisa Morehouse:** At the same time, he started talking to Shizuko's caregivers as his aunt curled up in her bed in a coma, they told him what she was like before the stroke.

**Mas:** They actually would say, "We love Ms. Sugi. Oh, she's so full of life."

**Lisa Morehouse:** She'd sneak up on someone, pinch them and run away, giggling. Shizuku wandered the care home halls so much that the staff got her those tennis shoes that lit up when she walked.

**Mas:** She'd put on those tennis shoes and walk up and down the hall and watch the lights go sparkling as she ran up and down and ran back, and she would do that for hours. And they go, "She loved hot coffee in the morning." And when she was finished with her cup, she would throw the cup over her shoulder, so they quickly realized that they had to switch cups from a glass cup or a plastic cup to a Styrofoam cup.

**Lisa Morehouse:** And they moved her seat so that her back was to a wall and her cup would hit that and not another person.

**Mas**: That was her trademark. She was carefree, free enough to do that.

**Lisa Morehouse:** As Mas was listening to these stories, building an image in his mind of the woman his aunt had become.

**Mas:** We were planning her funeral. The doctors that I saw and nurses and nursing staff at the assisted care center all thought she would die. The caregivers said, "We'll see." They figured out a way of feeding her, not intravenously, not through a tube. They figured out a way where they could tickle her and she would kind of stir from her comatose state. They would give her liquid diet. And I remember I started writing notes and letters to all the relatives, giving them updates that Shizuko is still in hospice.

**Lisa Morehouse:** It had been three months since Mas got that first fateful call. Then, he got another one, this time from the care home.

**Mas:** "Hey, you know your aunt? She's up." I said, "What?" "She woke up. You should come visit her."

**Lisa Morehouse:** When Mas arrived at the home, one protective caregiver asked who he was.

**Mas:** And I said, "Well, I'm her nephew. I'm her family." And he looked at me and he goes, "Where have you been all these years?" And it just hit me right here, because he was right. And it made me realize they were her family. I wanted this kind of this image you see in a movie or something where she looks at me, I look at her, we start crying and we hug each other. No, she didn't know who I was. So, I go up to her. What do I say? "Hey, I'm your nephew, good to meet you." She looks at me, I look at her and then she kicks me. She kicks me, she kicks me, and I go, "What?" And I looked and I realized she wanted her shoe tied. And it was the perfect way to be reintroduced to Shizuko and her story.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas called his out-of-town family and told them the news. They started coming to the Central Valley to visit again.

**Mas:** It was a very different type of dynamic because people tried to talk with Shizuko, and she did not recognize anyone. I remember my aunt coming and started speaking to her in Japanese.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Shizuko now roamed the halls in a wheelchair and sometimes allowed Mas to help her around people who blocked her path.

**Mas:** Yeah. She didn't kick me anymore. She would touch my face, which I thought was a sign that I was something to her.

**Lisa Morehouse:** The more time he spent with Shizuko, the more stories heard about her, the more any anger he had once felt dissipated.

**Mas**: I began to realize, no, this family secret isn't depressing. It's about life. She's alive in Fresno. She's part of this family coming back together. It's really about like a family reunion with the past in the present. And I think my grandmother, my uncle, my family let go of Shizuko, believing she was better off. And I have to say she had survived 70 years of institutional care. The caregivers said she was full of life. And I just have to say I think that was the right choice.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Mas and his family had about a year and a half with Shizuko. When she died at age 93.

**Mas:** She was cremated, and I got a niche for her along with the family. And now, she was finally united.

**Lisa Morehouse:** They could mark the passing of a beloved family member, not a stranger. At her memorial service, Mas told the story he'd heard from a caregiver about how every morning, Shizuko would toss her coffee cup over her shoulder.

**Mas:** So, I gave everybody a Styrofoam cup and said, "I want you to pretend to drink and throw the cup over your shoulder." It was amazing. All the family couldn't do that. They were looking behind saying, "I'm sorry, I don't want to hit you." It was classic. We were restricted by what we thought was proper behavior where Shizuko, Ms. Sugi, was free enough just toss it.

**Glynn Washington:** A very big thank you to David Masumoto for sharing his story. Mas wrote about Shizuko in his book, *Secret Harvest*. And this story, it's part of Lisa's podcast, California Foodways. Give support from California Humanities and the Food and Environmental Reporting Network. Recently, Lisa drove down to Fresno to see Mas again.

**Mas**: This one might be rooted a little deeper.

**Lisa Morehouse:** We're in a row of spring lady peaches, Mas planted in 1985 when his daughter was born. He's going to plant a new tree. But first, he's removing parts of an old stump that's rotted out.

**Mas:** The old tree has been pulled out. It's giving up its space. It's time for this tree to move on. And then, we'd plant a new tree in this spot.

**Lisa Morehouse:** Aunt Shizuko's now in his pantheon of ghosts. Another resilient ancestor helping out with the peaches. He farms with her spirit now.

**Mas:** There is this theory abouthow trees and plants talk to each other. Would the new roots say, "Oh, I'm in this comfort zone of one of my ancestors"?

**Lisa Morehouse:** Or does the old decaying tree just make the perfect soil for the new one?

**Mas**: And I would like to think it's both.

**Glynn Washington:** The original score for this piece was by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by Lisa Morehouse.

Now after the break, we're going to a very special pond to meet a very special legend. Stay tuned.

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. When I was a kid growing up in rural Michigan, we would wait for the pond to freeze over every winter. To test the ice for proper thickness, we tease and tease this kid, Joey. Tell him to go walk in the middle of the lake. Go out there, jump up and down. If he did it without falling in, we're good to go. Peter Aguero, he knows what it's like to be Joey.

**Peter Aguero:** When I was 13 years old, Nellie's Pond froze for the first time since my mom was a little girl. It's a Saturday afternoon, and I'm putting on my jacket and my hat, and I'm getting ready to get out of the house. In the living room, my mother's crimping my sister's hair because it's 1990 and that's what you do. She's of the opinion that my sister's hair is "a rat's nest." And my sister's rebuttal is, "I hate you." My dad's laying on the floor on his side, chain smoking Marlboro Reds, watching college football. One of the routines was that every Saturday night at around dinner time, there was a Saturday night fight.

Somebody would say something which would remind somebody of something else, and then somebody would explode and leave the table, and two people would cry, and somebody would have to do the dishes every week. So, Saturday afternoon was always kind of the undercard, getting ready for that fight, and I just wanted to get out of the house. I leave my family. I go to the garage and get my bike and ride a couple minutes over to Nellie's Pond.

[scintillating music]

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

[children laughing and shouting]

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

Eric's got a big pumpkin head and his hair is too blonde. You know those kids' hair is just too blonde? That's Eric. He's a perfect henchman.

I turn around and I see his boss, Mike Dawes. Mike has got a flat-top haircut and these porcine eyes and braces. He looks like a pig [bleep] a lawnmower. And he's got his hands clamped on my hands, on the handlebars. And he's yelling in my face, he wants to fight. "Come on, there's your hat, it's up in the tree. What are you going to do? Kick your ass." He's screaming at me now. Mike's a year older than me. He's a big stocky kid. Now, at 13, I'm almost 6ft tall, but I haven't really grown into my size yet. And he's trying to get me to fight. "Come on, [bleep] what are you going to do?" And the hockey game stops and the kids are all watching. The three or four dads in the corner that are drinking coffee are looking too. And I'm in the middle on the spotlight. I didn't even ask for him.

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

I leave my hat for dead. And I turn around and push my bike through the little sliver of woods. And I ride a couple minutes back home. I pull my bike in the garage and I walk past my family and I go upstairs and I turn off my bedroom lights. And I lay on the bed and put a pillow over my face because I don't want to talk to anybody. I'm laying there, and I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, they're big, it's my dad. My dad grew up in Northeast Philly. He was a tough guy, and he always reminded me of that. He always wanted me to be a tough guy. And I knew I'd never measure up because I never had. A few years before, I won a dance contest, and I was excited about it. And instead of congratulating me, he called me a sissy. He's going to have a field day with this one.

He walks into my room, and I feel his big body sit on the foot of my bed. He says, "What's the matter, pal?" And from under the pillow, I say, "Nothing." And he lifts up the pillow. He says, "What's the matter, pal?" And I put it back down and say, "Nothing." He takes the pillow, he throws it across the room and says, "What's the matter, pal?" And I tell him, I say, "Mike Dawes." He nods his head and I tell him the story of what happened. He says, "Okay," and he crooks his finger. He says, "Come with me."

I follow him to the phone. It's a rotary phone. He looks up D for Dawes and dials six of the numbers. And I'm thinking, "Okay, he's going to call Mike's dad and tell Mike to stop bothering me. That's good." But then he dials the seventh number and his fingers right there on that seventh number and he hands me the receiver and he says, "You're going to call him and you're going to tell him you're going to fight him tomorrow at 3 o'clock." And he lets go of the number and the rotary dial seats back in and then it's ringing. And all I want to do with this phone ringing in my ear is just run away. But my dad's 8ft tall and 800 pounds, to me, he's the biggest man in the world, and I can't get around him.

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

You know, my dad didn't understand that kind of son that he had. The kind of son that he had like to make things with construction paper and go down by the river and read a book. But by him showing me how to fight, I could tell that he was trying to turn me into the son that he could understand. One that wasn't a constant disappointment, the kind of kid that he knew. That he knew.

So, I went along with it. He holds up his hands and he says, "Okay, you're right handed. You're going to stand like this and you're going to jab with your left to get space. And then when you can, you're going to throw your strong right." And he shows me how to make my fist correctly, he shows me how to stand and use my weight behind the punches. I feel my fists hitting his hands like meat on meatand I'm believing in myself, like maybe this is going to work out and I feel strong. He pats me on the back. He says, "You're going to do fine, son." And I believe it, I'm going to do fine.

We go inside and during dinner, my sister says something that reminds my mom of something. She says something that makes my dad explode. And he leaves the table, my mom, my sister starts to cry. I have to do the dishes. Pretty good Saturday night fight all things considered. That night, I have a hard time getting to sleep. I'm nervous because I'm 13 years old and the next day, I got a scheduled fight like I'm George Foreman.

I eventually drift off and the next morning, I wake up and I get my second favorite hat. It's just red. My dad's laying on the floor chain-smoking, Marlboro Reds and watching NFL football. My mom's combing out my sister's hair. "It's a rat's nest." "I hate you." It's time for me to go. I push my bike through that little sliver of woods and I go out to the ice. And it's empty. While the kids are somewhere else, I have the pond all to myself. And I ride right out into the middle. And it's 2:50, and I'm straddling my bike all by myself. It's 2:55 and 2:57, 2:59. I'm just standing there and I'm looking up at the sky. It's one of those slate gray winter skies that looks like it's about 2ft above your head. So, 3 o'clock, all alone. It's just me and the sky. At 3:05, I see a rustle in the bushes across the way. And I start up, and nothing. It must be a dog or a squirrel or something. 3:10, I put my back down, I start to bounce around on the balls of my feet, I'm looking all over the place, waiting for this kid to walk onto the ice. 3:15, 3:25, 3:27, I go get a branch from a deadfall and I started to throw it up on my hat. And on the fourth try, it knocks my hat out of the branch and I catch it in my hand, and I put my red hat in my pocket and put my Eagles hat back on.

And it's 3:39 and I realize he's not showing up. I get back on my bike. I push it through that little sliver of woods and I take the long way home. And I put my bike in the garage. And I walk past my family without even looking at them. And I go upstairs and I turn off my bedroom light. And I lay on the bed and I put a pillow over my face because I don't want to talk to anybody. I wait for those footsteps to come up the stairs. And I'm waiting for him to ask me what happened. I don't know what to tell him. I just know that he's going to be disappointed in me. I'm not going to be the son that he wanted. But I never hear those footsteps, and he never comes up, and he never mentions it again.

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

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

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The truth is this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you go to a family event where your uncle tries to explain the concept of triple cousins to you, and you could stop them right there and say that absolutely no way, no how will you stand to hear any more family secrets right now, not one more under any circumstance. It's enough already. True story. And you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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