[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn Washington:** Okay, so I'm going to say something that is not particularly controversial in 99% of the country. Something simple, something innocuous. And here it is.

See, from time to time, especially on a hot summer day, maybe even at a sporting event, I like to enjoy a hot dog. Not something I eat on the daily. It's an occasional treat that brings me great joy. And on my hot dog, I don't really like mustard. My two favorite toppings are ketchup and mayo, along with some onions. And you might be thinking, "Glenn, but I don't see the problem. I don't understand the controversy to which you allude." Well, my friend, that means you are not either from New York or Chicago territory where a grown man is not allowed to mind his own business and put his condiments of choice on his hot dog that he paid his own money for without incurring the wrath of both vendor and passerby for the crime, the audacity, the temerity of preparing your own lunch the way you'd like to eat it.

No, no, no, no, no, noo. They will stop in their tracks, postpone important meetings in their busy schedules, call in late for daycare pickup just to let you know that you are a barbarian of the highest order, I say to them, "Be gone, you don't scare me anymore, I won't be intimidated." Because I know something. I know something about the struggle. I know something about the pain. You think this tube of meat placed inside a savory roll happens by accident so you can act all high and mighty? It does not. I know what it's like to fight for your hot dog." And after today's show, perhaps you will too.

Snap proudly presents the Hot Dog King of New York. My name is Glynn Washington, and I will say you grill hot dogs, heathens. You don't boil them. But you do you, at least when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[up tempo music]

We begin where they say there's 8 million stories in the Naked City right now. Snap producer, Bo Walsh, is standing in front of 82nd Street and 5th Avenue with Dan Rossi. And Dan, he has one of those stories to tell and as I've alluded, there's no boiling water over here, Snappas, not here. We've got your 100% grass-fed beef, goes on the grill where it can sizzle. See what I'm saying? Snap Judgment.

**Dan Rossi:** Oh, I remember telling one of the guys that this is just a fancy warehouse and that guy got all upset. You have to be in all over the place. You just have to be. It just got everything at this damn place.

**Bo Walsh:** I'm walking with Dan Rossi through the halls of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Dan Rossi:** That's the way the people are going, this way.

**Bo Walsh:** He stops to admire the 400-square-foot skylight that hangs from the ceiling.

**Dan Rossi:** This is all simple stuff. It's just glass, that's all it is.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan helped build it over 40 years ago when he was a sheet metal worker.

**Dan Rossi:** And I remember welding all the parts on it and how hard it was because if you know anything about welding, as soon as you make heat, the metal starts to bend. And it was so hard to keep this thing-- and I'm saying, "Son of a bitch, that's where it is. I'm looking at it." It was beautiful job. But you can't compare building that to some of this art, you can't do it, it's a different ballgame.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan and I walk past the ancient tombs and medieval swords, out of the Met and down the steps.

**Dan Rossi:** Okay, we'll get out of here.

**Bo Walsh:** We're there outside, surrounded by tourists and New Yorkers, all grabbing a bite. It stands, his hot dog cart.

[jazz music]

**Dan Rossi:** And then, you come out and you see my carts, that's a pretty nice thing.

**Speaker:** It hits you right in the face.

**Dan Rossi:** It took me a long time to put ketchup on a hot dog. New York, you never heard of ketchup on it? Never ever.

**Speaker:** Mustard.

**Dan Rossi:** Only mustard. That's it.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan's cart location sits in one of the most coveted vending spots in all of New York City.

**Dan Rossi:** Richest block there is. Who's better than me, right?

**Bo Walsh:** And just to keep this spot, Dan Rossi has been sleeping in his old white painters van right across the street for the past 12 years.

**Dan Rossi:** Oh my God. [car starts] I crushed the nerve canal in lower back and in my neck. The sleeping probably did it.

**Bo Walsh:** When was the last time you slept in a bed?

**Dan Rossi:** I can't even tell you that. I usually get three or four nights a year. Probably couldn't fall asleep in a bed anymore. Most mornings, I wake up and say, "What the hell am I doing here?" Every time I'm doing this, I say the same thing every day. And every day, I'm back for Dan.

**Bo Walsh:** For Dan, his story starts in the 80s when a friend who knew he was good with his hands asked him to build a hot dog cart.

**Dan Rossi:** I never really looked at a hot dog cart. It's something you see, but you never really examine it to how to make it. So, I said, "Well, let me go take a look." I went and I found one and I said, "Well, this is not a big deal."

**Bo Walsh:** Dan built the cart easily, was able to sell it, and walked away with $1000 and saw an opportunity here.

**Dan Rossi:** What Ireally wanted to do, just wanted to set up a small shop, maybe three, four, five men, and make a good living. That's all.

**Bo Walsh:** So, Dan hired a crew, and Dan and his crew started making all kinds of carts. Hot dog carts, ice cream carts, fruit carts.

**Dan Rossi:** I said you know what, I'm hustling and hustling and hustling. If I had the permits, well, then I can actually build carts and put them on the street.

**Bo Walsh:** That's when one of his clients, who had 399 permits, offered to sell Dan his business. Overnight, he went from just building carts to leasing them out for $5 a day all over the streets of New York.

**Dan Rossi:** I would have to say the average cart at the time was probably making $300, $400 a day. That was then. That was good money.

**Bo Walsh:** Soon, he had over 300 people, each running their own small business.

**Dan Rossi:** Every immigrant in the world, every country, you name it. A big influx came with Afghan immigrants and Russian Jewish immigrants. And it was at the time of the war between Russia and Afghanistan. So, it was pretty tough getting them in the same room together. Our leases were going great. We had a great customer base.

**Bo Walsh:** When a company offered to sell Dan another hundred permits, Dan jumped at it. Now, he had 499, the most in the city.

**Dan Rossi:** It felt good, that position I was in and we were making money, my men were all making money. Everybody was in a good position.

**Bo Walsh:** Life was especially good for Dan and his family. He got a house on six acres out in Greenwich, Connecticut, for his wife and four daughters. It was all a dream for a guy who had never really known what weekends were.

**Dan Rossi:** I took my wife out every Saturday night. We went to dinner. I mean, it was like we were in a different world. I said, "This is how real people live. Not guys that are hustling every minute of the day, trying to see how they're going to do. This is a normal life," I said. We came from nothing, my wife and I, from really nothing. And I told my wife, I said, "Look what we did, and we did it right."

**Bo Walsh:** While Dan Rossi was enjoying success, a rising, powerful real estate tycoon was making a lot of noise.

**Dan Rossi:** We would hear on the radio, this guy whining all day long. This guy, Trump.

[radio clip]

**Trump:** You know, I love getting even with people, but I will--

**Radio Speaker:** You love getting even?

**Trump:** Oh, absolutely.

[clip ends]

**Dan Rossi:** And all we did was complain about the vendors, and it was relentless.

**Bo Walsh:** Trump didn't like the vendors clogging the sidewalks by his Fifth Avenue high rise.

**Dan Rossi:** They're making a bazaar, it looked like we're in Egypt or something. Look at all this crap out here. I mean, you can't walk. It was all nonsense. I said, "Who is this guy?" I didn't even know who he was.

**Bo Walsh:** But then, Trump went further.

**Dan Rossi:** Then, he started to talk about the vets.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan was a Vietnam vet himself. When Dan started his business, he made sure to hire vets.

**Dan Rossi:** If you came to me and you said, "Dan, can you help my cousin? He's got no money," take the cart, go ahead, go to work. Any disabled vet walked in my place, got it for free. Just a handshake, that's all.

**Bo Walsh:** And now, Trump was coming after a special right that protects vets in New York.

**Dan Rossi:** The one thing that nobody understands is that a disabled vet has no restricted streets. I can go anywhere I want, any street I want.

**Bo Walsh:** That right to vend with no location restrictions has been a state law in New York since 1894, when it was designed to create economic opportunities for Civil War veterans returning home.

**Dan Rossi:** It was such a little thing to give them, but it was a great thing because it made people feel like they were productive again. You might not think vending is a big deal, but some of these guys are the biggest deal in the world because they can't work for anybody. Nobody's going to help them, and they're doing it on their own, and they're paying their bills. I mean, that's a great accomplishment for somebody who's been cast aside.

**Bo Walsh:** So, Dan wasn't too worried about Donald Trump until he picked up his morning paper with the headline that said 94 streets in Midtown Manhattan were now closed to all vendors, including disabled vets.

**Dan Rossi:** All I kept getting was calls from everybody. All my customers are calling me "Dan, what's going on?" What the hell's going on?" "I don't know." So, I say I might as well find out from the guy.

[radio clip]

**Radio Speaker:** It's our special Friday edition with the Mayor of New York City. And now, ladies and gentlemen, his honor, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

**Rudolph Giuliani:** Good morning. This is Mayor Rudy Giuliani. And today, for the first time, I'm in the studio.

[clip ends]

**Bo Walsh:** So,a few days later, Dan called into Mayor Rudy Giuliani's radio show to get some answers.

**Dan Rossi:** I called him up, and I wished him and his family a Happy Easter. And I said, look, "I'm with the vending business, and you guys have closed 94 streets. Why? Why would you do that? We're up to date on laws. We know what's going on." He says, "I don't know anything about that." I say, "Well, maybe you don't, but it happened." I said, "What could we do?" He says, "Wait a minute. They closed 94 streets? I'm the mayor, I should know that." And he says, "Well, I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

**Bo Walsh:** But days later, the streets remained closed.

**Dan Rossi:** I organized, I went up there and argued with them.

**Bo Walsh:** That's when Dan became an unofficial spokesperson for the vendors. He showed up at city council meetings to speak out against the street closures.

**Dan Rossi:** I said, "What you're doing is crazy. All you got to do is limit the number of carts to two on a block." I mean, you got thousands of blocks and you got only a few vendors.

**Bo Walsh:** And to defend the rights of disabled vets to vend, he even went up to Albany to go before the state legislature.

**Dan Rossi:** I said these sons of bitches. It's bad enough you took away their livelihoods. Here they are, they're all making big six-figure numbers. I mean, that's the biggest insult in the world.

**Bo Walsh:** And now, Dan was making his own headlines in the New York Times.

**Dan Rossi:** The New York Times came in and they did like a whole full page for me. And right on top of know, "The New York Push Cart King." And the worst thing about it is whenever I saw those old movies about the kings and everything, and they would say, "The king is dead. Long live the king," I said, look at this, "The king is going to be dead and somebody else is going to be the king," I didn't like that.

**Bo Walsh:** The article questioned whether Dan should be allowed to own as many permits as he did, 16% of the 3100 that were out at that time.

**Dan Rossi:** They said, "Sure, this guy's got 500 permits and nobody else can get one." Well, I'm not stopping them from getting one, the city is. This is a cap.

**Bo Walsh:** New York City had a cap in place to limit the number of carts on the streets.

**Dan Rossi:** There were no more permits. You couldn't get any.

**Bo Walsh:** To Dan, this was a problem that the city had created, not him.

**Dan Rossi:** I've got to give up my 500 permits so they can get them? Why don't they just make 500 more? I'm laughing, but I should have been saying, "Holy Christ, I'm in trouble."

**Bo Walsh:** Then, the New York Daily News accused him of making a fortune exploiting the vendors who rented his carts.

**Dan Rossi:** It was the way they were talking about me. "THIS guy's greedy. He wants to eat by himself." Oh, I got a lot of permits and I made some money. What did I do wrong? Tell me what I'm doing wrong? I'm just a vendor guy. I might have had the largest vending company in New York, but compared to these people, I was nothing. I was like a pebble compared to the beach, I was nothing. I remember sitting down with one deputy mayor and he says, "You back away from these guys," meaning the vets. And I say, "That's not going to happen." He says, "Well, we're going to bankrupt you." I said, "Well, you do what you got to do, and if you take me down, you take me down. What can I tell you?"

Always lonely at the top, Snappas. When we return, will Dan Rossi's push cart kingdom be toppled or can he protect the throne? Stay tuned.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn Washington:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to the Hot Dog King of New York episode. When last we left, Dan Rossi was fighting the ban on street vendors in Manhattan. And that has put him in the crosshairs of some of New York City's most rich, most powerful. Snap Judgment.

[intriguing music]

**Rudolph Giuliani:** You can't vend anywhere that you want to. A civilized, decent city can't exist if people get to decide where they're going to do things. And the city has no ability to say, "There are too many people here. It's too crowded there, this affects public safety, the ability to use the streets."

**Bo Walsh:** When Dan heard Mayor Giuliani, he was holding a press conference about the street closures, he decided to show up with his attorney.

**Dan Rossi:** Every camera you could think of, every news station you could think of, I was there. Behind Giuliani was all these big boards, five or six of these big 3x5 boards, and they had different kind of graphs on them. And on each one was my name on top of each one. And he carved them up, "He owns this much of this industry." It hit me like a brick when I saw my name on all these posters. I said, "What is this? What the hell is going on here?" He completely reversed everything to make me the bad guy. So now, one of the reporters says, "Okay, he owns 499 permits. What has he done wrong?" And he couldn't answer. And that was the end of the thing.

And they were all leaving, and I get up with my attorney, I walk over the table, and I said, "I'm Dan Rossi" He didn’t know me, he never saw me. "I'm Dan Rossi. Who do you think you are talking about. You don’t know me. You don’t know what I've done in my life. Who are you to talk like this?" So, he's got his head looking down at the ground and he don’t know what to do. And I say "Oh, you didn’t have any problem looking at these TV cameras. Look at me in the eye." And he's looking down, and he says, "You know what? You're just a punk." And I am going over the table. My lawyer grabs me and he's holding me back and Giuliani runs out the door. And I turned around, he says, "Are you crazy, Dan. You can't go attach a mayor," I said "Why not? He's attacked me for the last half hour, why not? As he's trying to destroy my life, I can't go smack him in the head?"

**Bo Walsh:** That same week, Dan was in his office when he noticed across the street, a camera.

**Dan Rossi:** It was on a tripod. This big goddamn camera with the telescopic lens.

**Bo Walsh:** Pointed directly at his shop.

**Dan Rossi:** You saw the guy. I mean, it wasn't like he was trying to hide. "Look at this," I said, "Oh, my god," and I say, "Now, nobody's going to walk in this door."

**Bo Walsh:** And then the phone calls started.

[phone ringing]

**Dan Rossi:** We knew the phone was bugged. But one day, I just picked it up, and I got the click and as soon as I heard that double click, I knew exactly what was going on. And I said, "Look at this. Look at this." But then, we started to get threatening phone calls. So, I would get a phone call, "We're going to do this to you. We're going to do that to you." Cursing, "We're going to cut this off, and we're going to do this."

**Bo Walsh:** Dan knew he had put a target on his back, but the real threat to everything he built came from the New York City Council. They passed the one-vendor one-permit law. It would later be referred to as the Dan Rossi law.

**Dan Rossi:** What the law said was, you can't have more than one. You can't lease a permit. You can't lease a cart with a permit.

**Bo Walsh:** Overnight, Dan lost all but 1 of his 499 permits.

**Dan Rossi:** What am I going to do with one permit? What can I do with it? I remember telling my wife, "We could walk now." And she says, "Well, I know you're not walking, and you got to fight. They can't do this and say this about you, because then it's true." I said, "Anne, you don't understand. They'll take our shoes. They got everybody in their pockets." She says, "So, let them take our shoes."

**Bo Walsh:** And they do. When Dan tries to go back to building carts, all of his carts are failing the health inspection.

**Dan Rossi:** Well, how can you fail it? I mean, I set this inspection program up. Everything that you're doing is what I taught you guys how to do years ago. And the inspector says, "These are Dan Rossi's carts, fail them." I was really down. I was getting very depressed. The few Jewish customers I had, I mean, the Orthodox Jews, they were very religious. And one kid comes up, I'm sitting in my office all by myself. The place is a ghost town, there's nothing going on. And he comes in, I say, "How you're doing? But I can't help you. Those days are gone." He says, "No, I didn't come up here to get help. I came up there to see how you're doing. I know how hard it's been for you, but I know you," he says, "I know that everything they're saying about you is lies. I know they've got people out there lying about you. We know it, we hear it on the street. And I just want to make sure you're okay." And it touched me, it really did that somebody cared. And he says, "I want you to come and talk to my rabbi." And I say, "I'm a Catholic," and I just couldn't do it. But it was enough that he came, and he thought about me. That was something.

I was in the toilet, and my guys were sitting around doing nothing. It was terrible. And I say, "I can't do it no more. I can't do it. There's nothing coming. Week after week, we're here, nothing's happening. I've got to shut it down."

**Bo Walsh:** Dan laid off his entire crew and closed his business' doors for good.

**Dan Rossi:** We're closed, doll. You've got to go next door. I failed for everybody, I failed for my family, I failed for these guys. And that was the end of it.

**Bo Walsh:** But Dan kept fighting. He went into debt trying to appeal the one-vendor one-permit law for nothing. His wife suffered a stroke. He lost the house in Greenwich. And the man who everyone called the pushcart king ended up living out of a van.

**Dan Rossi:** We had no choice. We had nowhere to go. It was just me and my wife and the van I borrowed. I mean, I had just given up on trying to make a living, I just gave up. I didn't know how to do it anymore. I'm saying, "Here I am," I reach in my pocket and there was a roll of bills and now I can't find 50 cents for a newspaper? Yeah, it was what happened to me. I just couldn't put it together. I resorted to borrowing money from people and I never did that. I never did that.

**Bo Walsh:** Eventually, family did take Dan and his wife in, and Dan went back to trying to hustle side jobs to make a few bucks. Then, Dan got a call from a disabled vet. He had a hot dog cart right in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but he told Dan he was being pushed out.

**Dan Rossi:** And I said, "Well, let me go down there and see what the problem is. There's not much I could do, but at least let me see what the problem is." They took this little Cushman scooter and put it in his spot. I'm talking to him, and I said, "Why don't you just move a few feet? It's not that big of a difference." But what he was saying was, "They're taking away my dignity, my rights to vend where I'm allowed." He didn't have it in him to come back the next day. And then, it hit me. And I'm sitting there and I'm saying, "I have one permit that they left me with. If I went and got a cart and I put it over here and at the end of the day, I made 100 bucks, I made 100 bucks." I actually said to myself, "Dan, you want to really get back into this fight?" And to me, that thought lasted about one second, and I say, "Where do I get a cart?"

**Bo Walsh:** The man who had built hundreds of carts now had to borrow one.

**Dan Rossi:** I'll tell you, it was very humiliating to me personally. I was the largest in the history of the city and here I am, borrowing a cart. Very humbling. I said, "I can't believe that I'm doing this, but I got to eat." So, what do you want on that jumbo? My way of doing it.

**Speaker:** Yeah, I want the Dan special.

**Dan Rossi:** Only one way to make it. Spicy, mustard, sauerkraut and just a taste of onions and that's it. You don't get crazy. I never served a hot dog in my life and here I am. I just fell right into it, how hard could this be? The good part about it is no matter what you put on it, you always taste the hot dog. It's a good hot dog.

**Bo Walsh** From the first hot dog that he served in front of the Met, it was a battle with the cops.

**Dan Rossi:** I told the guys, "Look, guys, I know the law. I'm a disabled vet. Just leave me alone. I'm not looking for trouble. I just need to get on my feet."

**Bo Walsh** And since he's been there.

**Dan Rossi:** Well, I'm not going to leave.

**Cop:** We can't allow you to come in.

**Dan Rossi:** I'm in already.

**Cop:** Right. And that's why you're receiving a summons.

**Dan Rossi:** They were relentless. Three times a day. I mean, after a while I said, "Guys, I'm starting to get pissed off." I could be in any park.

**Cop:** Sergeant Harrison, do you remember that saying he can be in any park?

**Dan Rossi:** Read it.

**Cop:** Does it say he can be in any-- Would you give it to me again?

**Dan Rossi:** "If you come back again, we're going to do something." So, I said, "Next time, I'm moving 10ft closer." As they came, they're talking to me, I just took the cart and pushed it 10ft closer. Talk to me again, I pushed another 10ft closer. When I get in the middle, I'm not moving. "I'm letting you know now, stop what you're doing." They wouldn't stop. Got in front of the Met right in the middle, and now what? They arrested me. [laughs]

**Cop:** And last time, we put in handcuffs, brought to the precinct, received the summons, we took the cart.

**Dan Rossi:** And you're going to have to do that again. And you're going to have to do it again and again until you allow me to exercise my rights under the law.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan's still battling with the cops.

**Dan Rossi:** So now, we have a disagreement.

**Female Cop:** Yes.

**Dan Rossi:** I'm in the park and you want me to leave? You've got to arrest for me to leave. Then, we'll push it out, that's it.

**Bo Walsh:** Dan has been arrested six times for vending in front of the Met. He's been issued over 350 tickets.

**Dan Rossi:** I just wanted to go to work, make a few hundred dollars, save enough to get an apartment, and we start living our life again. But when they started to come at me, I mean, I'm the kind of guy that after a while, now you want to get in a fight, I'll get in a fight, if that's what you want. I don't back away from nobody. When you're harassing me and trying to abuse me, it's not going to work. This is all I've got left. Not that it amounts to much, but it's all I got left.

**Bo Walsh:** Every night, Dan lays down in his van parked across the street from the Met, hoping to get a few hours of sleep before doing it all again the next day.

[snoring sounds]

**Dan Rossi:** I don't even know what day it is sometimes. I ask my daughter, I ask one of the guys, what's today? Thursday, Friday? I just get lost in the time. And the worst part about it, I don't get to see my wife. I keep Sunday afternoon open for her so I could take it her to brunch, and we can have a few hours together. And then, my daughters will take her down, and she'll stay with me at the Met for a few hours now and then.

**Speaker:** Hello.

**Dan Rossi:** Hi.

**Speaker:** Six--

**Dan Rossi:** Six hot dogs?

**Speaker:** Six hot dogs and fries.

**Dan Rossi:** And fries?

**Bo Walsh:** Why are you still out there, and what keeps you going?

**Dan Rossi:** Well, I'm out there because I still have to make a living, still got to keep a roof over my wife's head. And what keeps me going is just a day's work, plus the fact that I just can't let them beat me. First hot dog, mustard, ketchup?

**Speaker:** One without.

**Dan Rossi:** The next one?

**Speaker:** Ketchup and mustard.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn Washington:** Thank you, thank you to Dan Rossi for sharing his story with the Snap. At 73 years young, Dan continues to hold down his spot in front of the Met. So, if you're ever nearby, stop by and salute the New York City Hot Dog King. Tell him I said to ask for ketchup. Actually, you might not want to do that. Now, there is so much we couldn't share with you about Dan's experience. To find out more, check out his new memoir, *The New York Hot Dog King: From Rags to Riches to Less Than Rags.* You can find it as well as links to all the Hot Dog King stuff, Dan Rossi's social media, all of it at *snapjudgement.org.* Additional thanks to our friends at VICE, whose series, Munchies, featured Dan back in 2019 and was a big inspiration for this story. You can find a link to that video on our site as well, *snapjudgment.org.* The Hot Dog King of New York was scored by Clay Xavier and the story was produced by Bo Walsh.

Now, in 2020, when Dan reopened his cart for business during the pandemic, the New York times once again came calling, this time with an article declaring that the Hot Dog King was back. Producer Bo Walsh was able to catch up with some of New York City's finest food vendors to hear a few words about the king.

**Speaker:** I met Dan Rossi once. I've seen him. He's where I get the footprint from to do what I have to do, which is sleep out here, move my car early and then 12 o'clock at night and sleep out here, my spot. That's what's happening all day. That's what I do.

**Speaker:** I just thought it was cool that, yeah, a marine was sticking it up to the city. He was the only one there that was legit and he was doing it.

**Speaker:** The man is still doing what he was doing, still strong and that's all that matters. That's all immaterial. Whatever they took from him is immaterial. And he's still here.

**Speaker:** We see every day like how he does. He sleeps in the van. He tries to help everybody. He's got a really big heart.

**Speaker:** Other people want him out of here and we always have said that's not going to happen because there are veterans here that are just going to help him out.

**Speaker:** He was really the king, the Hot Dog King.

**Glynn Washington:** Now, what Bo didn't tell you was that the legend of the Hot Dog King, Dan Rossi, goes beyond just the five boroughs. It spread all the way across the pond to the UK, where the Burner Band recorded this tribute song for the king.

[*Hot Dog King* by Burner Band playing]

Find the link to it on our website, *snapjudgment.org.*

[upbeat music]

Okay, after stuffing your face with hot dogs, get ready. We're going to summer camp when Snap Judgment continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington and Snappas, before we even get started with this next story, I want you to know that we've changed the names to protect the innocent. Today, we're about to take you to one of the scariest places ever, summer camp. Snap Judgment.

[singing]

**Sarah:** It's three days before the big dance at Camp Discovery in Northern Minnesota. Camp's in full swing. They're singing around the campfire. Kids are at waterfront. They're playing those trust games where you get blindfolded and have to walk around cones.

**Children:** Right, forward, [laughs] left, forward.

**Sarah:** But there's also so much excitement about the dance. Everybody's scrambling to get a date. And there are more girls than boys.

**Caitlin:** There's so much drama. Oh, my goodness.

**Sarah:** Caitlin's 13. She's into gymnastics. She has long, dark brown hair. She's popular. And she says if you want to stay up on the drama, who's asked who, who got dumped, there's one place to be.

**Caitlin:** If you go play basketball, usually the basketball crowd is kind of like the gossip area. That's where most of the things happen.

**Sarah:** And the negotiations of who's going to ask who are kind of complicated.

**Caitlin:** So, it's kind of like, "Ooh, I want him. Wait, I also want him," kind of thing. And then, you have one friend who wants to go with him, but it's like, "Wait, I wanted him too," and so should you say yes because you're my friend?

**Sarah:** Most of the boys seem like they could care less about the drama and the dance, except Nathan. He's a boy on a mission to get a date. Nathan's 11, funny and a little sheltered. This is his third summer at camp.

**Nathan:** That's one of the reasons I like to come here, because you don't have a parent to keep going, "Hey, don't do that. No. Hey, don't do that." But in other cases, it's learning what happens when you don't listen to your parents. [laughs]

**Sarah:** Last year, Nathan had an amazing time at the dance. He was too embarrassed to ask anybody, but he wore a suit, which was a big hit. This year, he really wants to go with someone. He's already asked one girl.

**Nathan:** And I might have gotten rejected. I don't know yet. She said, "I don't know." And I'm so nervous because I want to take her.

**Sarah:** Are you going to ask again?

**Nathan:** Yes.

**Sarah:** What's going to go through your head when you walk up to her?

**Nathan:** Uh, fear. Uh, [chuckles] mostly, fear. You know what girls do when they like a guy, they hit him, they do stuff like that, I know from experience. And guys, I don't know what they do. Showing off, that's what boys do.

**Sarah:** So, Nathan asks the girl again. She says no.

**Nathan:** I cried in the cabin. I cried in my bed. Cried in the bathroom.

**Sarah:** Why were you crying?

**Nathan:** Well, because I had never been rejected before.

**Sarah:** Never?

**Nathan:** Never. Not like that.

**Sarah:** Most of the kids here are really used to getting rejected because they all have skin diseases. Some kids have splotches or moles or scales. Some are bald or allergic to the sun. Some have life-threatening diseases. There are kids who get enormous blisters from just walking, eating, even changes in temperature. They're covered in bandages. They're in wheelchairs. Camp's swarming with dermatologists and nurses. There's a big table in the mess hall where kids line up to get their medicine. Compared to a lot of the campers, Caitlin's skin disease is pretty mild. She has eczema. She's an army brat, and every time she starts a new school, she has to explain what's wrong with her skin.

**Caitlin:** I remember one time I was going up to get a math sheet, and there was this person who I thought was beginning to be my friend, kind of. And I was going up to get a sheet, and she touched my elbow, which was really dry and rough at that time. And she yelled really loud, "Eww, that's disgusting. Your elbow is so rough and dry." And then, everybody came over and touched my elbow, and I felt like you know how you go to a museum or something and you're all staring at like a lizard inside a box or something? I felt like so much like that.

**Sarah:** Everybody at camp has this feeling like all the time in their normal lives. I have a skin disease. I've had this feeling. I came to this camp as a kid and as a counselor.

**Nathan:** It's not like you're at a regular camp, but it's the only time you'll ever be normal.

**Caitlin:** There's a sense here that you can just do whatever you want, be whoever you want, and your personality can completely change from school to here. I think this is a complete bully-free zone.

**Sarah:** At Camp Discovery, Caitlin's not a lizard. She's beautiful. She has her pick of suitors, but she only has eyes for Christian, a boy in a wheelchair who has epidermolysis bullosa. It's the most severe disease at camp. In some cases, it's fatal. Christian's skin is covered in blisters. His hands and feet are knotted and fused with scar tissue. His arms and legs are covered in bandages. And last year, he and Caitlin, they hung out.

**Caitlin:** We talked a lot during the dance, and after horseback riding, we went and saw the puppies and stuff. That was pretty cute. And took pictures with him and the puppies.

**Sarah:** Okay, so you guys definitely-- you know each other?

**Caitlin:** Yes. Kind of cute, I guess. Last year, we danced a lot, and he asked to take a picture with me at the end of the dance.

**Sarah:** But it turns out Rachel, Caitlin's cabinmate, also likes Christian. Rachel's quiet, funny, but quiet. She doesn't want to be interviewed. She has a disease called vitiligo. So, her skin is really, really blotchy. Rachel's already going to the dance with Christian, but she invites Caitlin to come as a sort of triple date. This is a power move in the world of middle school girl politics. They're both going to the dance with Christian, and nobody's feelings are getting hurt. Meanwhile, Nathan is still on the hunt for a date. He's also got EB, but not as badly as Christian. He wears bandages on his hands, elbows, and feet.

**Nathan:** It's basically where there's layers of skin in my skin, it doesn't have the glue between the layers. So, it just peels easily.

**Sarah:** And it like makes blisters?

**Nathan:** Yeah, blisters. It's junctional EB. It's not the worst, but it's not the best.

**Sarah:**  Now, there is a girl who likes Nathan. She's cute, but her skin is worse than those other girls. Nathan doesn't ask her to the dance. He asks someone else. And girls whose skin diseases you can't really see keep turning him down.

**Nathan:** One of the reasons why I aim for the pretty girls is I can't see myself. In my head, I have an envisioning of like a kid with no blemishes on the skin and so I just went for them first.

**Sarah:** I mean, when you think about the possibility of you not being asked because of your skin, how does it feel?

**Nathan:** A bit of anger, but I would understand.

**Sarah:** Why would you understand?

**Nathan:** Because I didn't ask Savannah. I mean, it's not all because of her skin. It's just-- Well, some of it is, yeah.

**Sarah:** You know, thinking about how she feels, not being asked maybe a little bit because of her skin, what does it make you feel like?

**Nathan:** I don't feel like a total monster, but seems a bit mean, just a bit.

**Sarah:** So, at skin camp, looks matter unless you have really bad EB, the blistering disease. These kids bandaged and in wheelchairs, they become the darlings of camp, especially the boys, who usually end up getting asked to the dance.

The last day of camp before the dance, a lot of girls leave waterfront early to get ready. Caitlin's the cabin makeup guru. She helps other girls with eyeliner and lipstick. The boys aren't so worried about how they look. Nathan's one of the first kids ready for the dance. He tells me he brushed his teeth and used Axe body wash. He brought his dress pants to camp, but he's packed them, so he's wearing yellow gym shorts.

[party noises]

The mess hall's all decorated. The tables are pushed to the sides. The lights are low, music's pumping. Caitlin and Rachel look cute in their dresses. Christian's wearing a button-down shirt, and they head into the dance together. Nathan waits outside for his date. It's been a rough week, getting rejected by girls he thought were in his league. At the last minute, his date ditches him and he's left alone.

**Nathan:** Feel a bit sad that I was rejected again. Basically, I don't know if I was rejected.

**Children:** Ohh, slow dance. It's time to slow down.

**Nathan:** Okay. I'm outside.

**Sarah:** Are you going to stay outside during the slow dance?

**Nathan:** Uh, I wonder if my date will come and find me if I still do have one. I wonder if I have a plan E.

[Kids talking in the background]

**Sarah:** Do you need a plan E?

**Nathan:** Maybe. Just in case. Nah, I don’t like slow dancing.

**Kid:** I don't either.

**Kid:** I don’t either.

**Kid:** It's the worst.

**Kid:** I slow danced once.

**Sarah:** Nathan's pretty bummed. So, I let him call his mom from my phone. He explained what happened with all his dates.

**Nathan's Mother:** Wait, tonight's the dance?

**Nathan:** Yes, it is.

**Nathan's Mother:** Did you tell Sarah what you did last year?

**Nathan:** Well, last year, what happened?

**Nathan's Mother:** You wore your--You took your nice suit, and you didn't plan to ask a girl, and girls were telling you to ask someone, and you absolutely refused to. You just went and danced and had a great time.

**Nathan:** I was embarrassed, yeah.

**Nathan's Mother:** Yeah, you were too embarrassed last year to ask.

**Nathan:** Yes.

**Sarah:** But you wore that wonderful suit which you then got all bloody.

**Nathan's Mother:** So, he did tell you about that?

**Sarah:** Yes. That he came home wearing a bloody suit.

**Nathan's Mother:** Yeah, with shower shoes that he had worn to the dance the night before, and you know he has fragile skin and someone had stepped on his foot that night at the dance, and about a third of his foot was a new wound. And he was so excited and tired, he didn't tell anyone. So, he traveled home that way.

**Sarah:** Oh, my god. [laughs]

**Nathan's Mother:** I know. He's not allowed to come home without making sure that somebody's looked at his hands and feet at least a little bit. So, Sarah said that she'd like me to encourage you to go in right now, and so that means right now.

**Nathan:** Okay.

**Nathan's Mother:** Would you do that for both of us?

**Nathan:** Yes, ma'am.

**Nathan's Mother:** I love you, son.

**Nathan:** Love you, mama.

**Sarah:** So, Nathan finally heads into the dance. Inside, things start off okay. I ask Rachel how it's going, she says, "Go talk to Christian."

Can I talk to you? You have two dates. What's that like?

**Christian:** It's fun.

**Sarah:** Yeah? What's the best part about having two dates to the dance?

**Christian:** Dancing.

**Sarah:** It's pretty nice. You get to dance with both of them.

**Christian:** Cool.

**Sarah:** But the thing is, he's not dancing with Caitlin. She's disappeared and is dancing with her friends. Christian starts asking Rachel where Caitlin is. He gets more and more upset. And then, he storms out of the mess hall and back to the boys' cabin, barricading his wheelchair against the door. Counselors finally convince them all to come back into the dance, and they start dancing in this weird, sad line. Rachel's holding a counselor's hand one side, Christian on the other. Christian's holding Caitlin's hand, and her face is buried in her counselor's stomach. She's sobbing. The dance ends, and they all leave sad.

**Caitlin:** Because it broke my heart to think that he probably doesn't get this much attention at all. And then, I ask him to dance, and I don't dance with him. I just wanted to dance with some of my friends. It's like I'm being a bully. And yeah, I felt like I was a bully in a place where there's supposed to be a bully-free zone.

**Sarah:** Yeah. It's like it's cool to go to the dance with the kid who has the worst skin disease, but then you don't dance with him, you know.

**Caitlin:** Yeah. It makes it even worse that the people who have it worse, I'm also like the meanesthere too. It's like all of the sudden that I am picking on the ones that I like went to the dance purposely to not dance with him.

**Sarah:** I don't think anybody thinks that's true.

**Caitlin:** I do.

**Sarah:** Well, I guess this is something where you just kind of learn.

**Caitlin:** Yeah. Right now, I feel like I'm not learning anything. But right now, it just feels like this is me in pain.

**Sarah:** And the night still isn't over. I'm talking to Caitlin by the bunks when there's a knock on the door. It's Christian, flanked by counselors. He's come with flowers, and he asks for Caitlin.

**Christian:** [crosstalk] come here?

**Sarah:** Yeah, I will, sure.

**Christian:** Thank you.

**Sarah:** Uh-huh. But Caitlin's so embarrassed and ashamed, she hesitates to even go to the door.

**Lacey:** You'll feel so much better. Let's do it.

**Caitlin:** No. Every time I look at him, I feel ten times worse.

**Lacey:** I know, but that's why we've got to fix it.

**Caitlin:** Itwon't be fixed. I'll always feel like this.

**Lacey:** You don't have to always feel like this.

**Caitlin:** But I will. When I get something in my head that I did something wrong, I just feel like that forever.

**Lacey:** He wants to make it better.

**Caitlin:** Because he did nothing wrong.

**Lacey:** He wants to talk to you. He doesn't know that he did nothing wrong. He wants to talk to you and work it out.

**Sarah:** So, Caitlin reluctantly goes to the door.

**Lacey:** Go on, [unintelligible 00:46:08]. You got it.

**Christian:** Sorry, Caitlin.

**Caitlin:** Thank you, I'm sorry too.

**Sarah:** Caitlin's counselors whisper to her to see if she can give Christian a hug.

**Caitlin:** No, no, no. Can I give you a hug?

**Christian:** Yeah.

**Caitlin:** Okay, I'm sorry too.

**Christian:** [unintelligible 00:46:36]

**Sarah:** Christian hands Caitlin a little bouquet of flowers. The thing is, Christian has spent the whole night chasing Caitlin. Rachel, the girl with a more visible skin disease, his other date has been forgotten. Lacey's their counselor, she's a dermatology resident, and she watched the whole night unfold.

**Lacey:** I think it probably is the most painful thing I've ever watched in person.

**Sarah:** Why?

**Lacey**: I think mostly because this camp is supposed to be a place where kids are safe from things like this, and they come here to fit in possibly for the first time in their whole lives. And even the ones who are doing the hurting, they understand what they're doing to the other kids, but they can't stop doing it.

**Sarah:** I mean, yeah, that's like the catch-22 of this place, right?

**Lacey:** It has its own hierarchy, and in some ways, it's different than the rest of the world. But in other ways it isn't, because even that backfires. I just wish that this wasn't a place that could even happen, I guess.

**Sarah:** She says that kind of makes it worse. A rough night turns into a rough morning. At the airport, all the kids are hugging and crying. Getting on that plane means heading back to the real world. Even though last night's drama was intense, nobody wants to go home.

**Glynn Washington:** Yes, there is lots of love for everyone at Camp Discovery. It's sponsored by the American Academy of Dermatology. And it is free, it is fun. Learn more about it by going to *aad.org,* search for Camp Discovery. We're going to have a link as well on *snapjudgment.org.*

The original sound design for that story was by Renzo Gorrio. That piece was produced by Sarah Harris.

[upbeat music]

Do you know what's even better than hearing a story?Giving one. Tis the season. You can give the gift of story. Send your friends and your enemies a little taste of the Snap Judgment podcast.

Snap is brought to you by the team that puts one hot dog in their mouth at a time. Except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Florene Wiley, Bo Walsh, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé, and Regina Bediako.

And this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you can own the most popular hot dog stand in New York City, and you can make a small change so that just one day a year you only serve vegan sausages. And when an angry mob responds by tearing your stand apart stick by stick, take solace in the fact that even then, in the middle of the mayhem, you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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