

**Dana:** I don't know what I'm doing with these yet. My intent is to use it as a podcast. That's what the goal is. But I don't know yet, so I was saying—'cause I've never done it—I can't go, "Let's act like we're a professional podcast already." I just want to be able to see them, talk to them over Zoom, and then go from there.

**Suzi:** For me, I know you so well that watching you do your hair when we talk is going to be fucking distracting to me. So I feel like we should just roll. [end preamble]

**Dana:** [start intro] Welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave. My name is Dana Black, and in 2016, I lost my mom. And now I'm talking to other people who have also lost their moms. And I don't just mean in death, because there are so many ways you can lose a mother. And we're going to get into it. So let's talk about our moms.

Welcome back. Thanks for coming back. I wish we were all on a patio together, and we were sipping a cocktail or a sparkling water, and talking too close to each other. And maybe, just maybe, one of you leans over and kisses me on the cheek, and then I hug you really tightly. Yeah, that's what I wish for all of us right now.

So I know that nobody wants to relive 2020. I get it, I get it. But what if we just relived one day, Mother's Day, May 10, 2020: the day that I did the first interview for this podcast? And I did it with the editor of this podcast, and one of my oldest and dearest friends, and someone who lost her mom when she was 13. We had decided to talk that morning at 10 A.M. Eastern—she's in Maine—9 A.M. Central, but she called me that morning and said, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I totally forgot there's construction happening on my property. I've just got to grab my gear—I need a couple minutes—and we're going to do this interview from my car." Because she's a fancy audio/video person and runs her own audio/video storytelling company, she can do that. Here I was in my closet in Chicago, trying to rig a dirty blanket over one of the closet doors—and all of sudden I feel like I didn't know how to use my computer—I had lost to ability to plug it in. I was a wreck. I think I was still in my pajamas. I was nervous. And then she tells me, "I don't want to watch you fidget with your hair over Zoom. I don't want to be distracted by that. We're going to do this old school, on the phone." So she throws me in the dark talking about my dead mom on Mother's Day, and off we went. I don't know if you can smell the manure through the phone as you listen, but just know that it's close by, cow manure. Just remember that.

I met this person when I was 16, at an arts camp at Wesleyan University called Center for Creative Youth. And I had been to summer camps before, mostly Christian-based camps. I also went to Showchoir Camp. That's right, it was an entire two weeks dedicated to just show choir—that's a whole other podcast. But this camp was full of artists and dancers and poets and actors and just kids from all over the country. And it

was so exciting. I met people with spiky, green hair and nose piercings. I was such a sheltered little kid, and just a nose piercing was thrilling. I fell in love with a gay guy. It was a magical summer. But I also fell in love with this person, because when I when met her, she was so independent and fiercely brilliant, and she read me her poetry, and she played her guitar for me, and she introduced me to Ani DiFranco. And she was one of the first people I'd met who'd lost a parent at a young age, which was something that wasn't even on my radar at that time. My mom wouldn't die for another 20 years.

In this conversation, we're going to talk about how you have to get on the moving walkway of life after grief at a young age, because there's no choice. We're going to talk about how it's hard to grieve your mom when your parents are divorced, even though it shouldn't be. We're going to talk how my mom loved collecting little miniature soap and shampoo bottles, and putting them in a little basket next to a pair of cozy slippers in the guest bedroom of our house, because she was from Leave It to Beaver. And we're going to talk about this little podcast journey we're on. And we're going to talk about our friendship. [5:00] This person loved my mom, and my mom loved this person.

This is Suzi Pond, one of my oldest and dearest friends, and the editor of I Swear on My Mother's Grave Podcast. I hope you enjoy it. [end intro]

I was going to say, "Happy Mother's Day, during the global pandemic of 2020," to you. Does it feel different?

Suzi: Versus? Oh, because it's a pandemic? Does Mother's Day feel different? No. No, it's kind of the same. I kind of just want my house to be really clean and be left alone for the day, but I also want the token childhood things for my kids, like, "Here Mommy." I haven't gotten any of those yet today, and I'm okay.

**Dana: There's still time. It's early. (laughs)**

Suzi: I think that's part of being a mom, is lowering what I need from my kids to feel good about my mothering. It's also a little bit contrived. Kids have made Mother's Day bittersweet and better for me. It was definitely a harder day for me before I had kids.

**Dana: I think it's harder today for some reason, for me because we're all online all the time now. And it's all we look at, 'cause it's all we have. So it's this way to connect with people, and it's this way to share and feel less alone. And then when the day of Mother's Day comes, this performative day, you feel more alone, because now you're once again comparing yourself to others, or thinking you're feeling left out, or feeling left out of the celebration. And so today—it's only 10:15—I've been awake for two**

**hours, and I already know that getting online will be really, really difficult today, more than it has in the past.**

Suzi: Why do you feel like you have to get online?

**Dana: Well, it's a habit. It's an addictive quality of, you check your phone, you open it up, and immediately you're like, "Ah!"**

Suzi: But if you know today is going to trigger you pretty hard, maybe just give yourself a few hours before you get on there.

**Dana: I think for me sometimes the best way to get through Mother's Day and has helped me for the last couple years, is reaching out to other people who have lost mothers. That helps me. But this year, the first thing I did, just ten minutes ago, was text all my friends who just had babies.**

Suzi: Ironically, to talk about motherhood and Mother's Day and mothering, I had to get away from my kids, so we could have this conversation.

**Dana: Your home, and drive.**

Suzi: That's right.

**Dana: In Maine—you live outside Portland, Maine.**

Suzi: Where it snowed yesterday, even though it's May.

**Dana: It's cold in Chicago. What do you see right now?**

Suzi: Well, I'm sort of in a field that's not used a lot. I was trying to park somewhere where the tourists wouldn't come, because this is one of the few places that are open right now in Maine, that you can walk near the coast, 'cause so much has been shut down. So this is kind of where they stored literally manure and things, so it's not where people normally park. But it's very picturesque. There's three greenhouses, and green grass, and trees that are just starting to think about getting their leaves.

**Dana: I'm staring at my underwear, my clothing, and my shoes.**

Suzi: You have a lot of shoes.

**Dana: I do have a lot of shoes.**

Suzi: My mom had a lot of shoes, actually, for the record. (laughs) She had more shoes than anyone I've ever known, which is really ironic, because I pretty much wear the same pair of Keen boots every day for seven months of the year up here in Maine.

**Dana: I assume you never—have you worn heels in your life?**

Suzi: (laughs) I think you're one of the few people who probably know the answer to that, which is, "Yes," but you probably know how I felt about wearing them.

**Dana: You didn't enjoy it.**

Suzi: I don't think I've had heels on for...

**Dana: I've known you a long time.**

Suzi: You have.

**Dana: When I think back on how long I've known you, sometimes I forget. I sometimes think I met you in college, and then my brain goes, "Uh-uh. No, no. You met her before college." And by meeting her during a summer program at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, I realized that I met a friend for life, but I never knew that you would influence my decision on where to go to college as well. So you got into Skidmore College, and then I followed you into the land of liberal arts in upstate New York. But I met you at—how old were we, 17?**

Suzi: 17.

**Dana: And we did a arts summer camp.**

Suzi: We've known each other for a long time. We've just been in each other's lives for a long, long time. We weren't always talking all the time over the years, and each of us were going through different things at different times, but you were always my solid. I knew that if I needed you, I could maybe get a hold of you.

**Dana: (laughs) Maybe I'd pick up. I pick up a lot more now in the pandemic.**

**But I can't remember the first time when I learned that your mother had passed. And she passed when you were [10:00] much younger. But I remember the moment talking about your mother in your apartment.**

Suzi: Really?

**Dana: I remember the wind. I remember the windows being open, and you were talking about her, and you showed me a picture which I hadn't seen in a long time. But I can't remember when I first learned. Was I 16? Was I at Wesleyan?**

Suzi: I'm sure it was then. I also don't know how much I—it was hard for me to talk about in the beginning and really own it, because I was super different. And so I think of all the places that I could have been open, it would have been probably there for the first time most open, because it was just all about feelings and emotions and art. And that's why doing something like that that summer was pivotal.

**Dana: 'Cause you went to boarding school, and your mother had been gone.**

Suzi: My mother died when I was in eighth grade. I was 13, almost 14. She died October 30, the day before Halloween, in eighth grade, which is probably the most awkward year of your life anyway.

**Dana: And had any of your friends lost a parent?**

Suzi: I have a vivid memory of someone named Carrie coming to junior high school. And I remember that her dad died, and she walked into the hall lined by lockers, and everyone just stopped talking and kind of made a path for her. Kids just don't know what to do. And I remember when I lost my mom, and I went back to school very soon after, maybe even the next day, it was all a blur. It was very strange. There was a lot of stuff then. I just didn't want to be that. I didn't want to be the other. And so I think I just put it away somewhere so I could function.

**Dana: Did you feel a sense of pressure to go back? Was that coming from your father, from other people in your life?**

Suzi: Yeah.

**Dana: Or was that your own feeling of other, not wanting to be different or stand out?**

Suzi: I didn't really have a choice. There wasn't a lot of grieving going on in my house. As you know, my dad had remarried, and there were already new little people on the scene.

**Dana: How long had they been divorced?**

Suzi: My dad had gotten remarried, and had been remarried for a few years before my mom died. And my parents had been divorced probably since I was five or six, so a while. Anyway, there wasn't a lot of grieving going on in my house. My dad wasn't going to grieve my mom, 'cause they were probably still mad at each other after a pretty bad

divorce. And he sort of had his eyes trained on his new wife and the new kids. And I remember my stepmom saying to me, "I'm sorry about your mom," and I bristled, 'cause I knew she didn't like my mom.

I knew very early on that even grieving was complicated. There were just so many things that I didn't have words for back then. And not that we ever have words for them, but we don't even know that we don't have words for them at that age. I didn't talk to talk to a lot of people about it. You were probably one of the first people that I actually ever really talked to about it, probably because you asked things. You were curious. It was so foreign to you. Ironically or sadly, you would come to know. But in the beginning, it was kind of probably, for our friendship, up there with being friends with someone who had flown on a plane to Antarctica. It was this weird, foreign thing.

**Dana: You were one of the first people I knew, that I can remember, that had lost a parent so young.**

Suzi: It was hard being open about mourning, and just the confusion, even if I didn't know that's what I wanted to be open about and process, because interestingly, the best friends that I've chosen over the years—I kind of collect them (laughs) as we do—all came from very, very traditional families—which isn't to say that there wasn't drama. But you guys were basically for me, in the 2000s, the closest thing to the Cleavers that I'd ever known. It was like their whole worlds revolved around you. And because they were so giving, you were so giving, and you were so loving, and they were so loving towards your friends. And they kind of gave me harbor.

I don't remember the whole journey back. I just remember I kind of had to get on the moving walkway, because there was no choice. So I just got on and started moving. And then you start to navigate your life. And everything you do, you're holding this thing that's a part of you and that impacts you. But maybe because it happened so early for me—13, almost 14—and maybe because I was going to get angsty and rebellious anyway, I'm grateful that I had that happen. And then I could go explore music and art, and find peace and validation. Even if it was just music that was angry sometimes. It was okay-to-be-angry music. 'Cause I couldn't really see that reflection in any of my friends, but I could see the emotional reflection in [15:00] the art and music around me.

**Dana: Even adults are sometimes forced to jump back in too quickly. And they don't know how to process. They don't know how to communicate. They go back to their jobs. They go back to their normal routines. I can't imagine, as a child, how difficult it is. And yet I still think, as adults, we cope just the same way, in a weird way. I took only a week off of work when my mother died. Six days, and then you go right back. And some people take one day, and their trauma can come later. They crack later, or**

**we push it down. So I'm just thinking about what you said about children jumping so quickly back into their routine, and not wanting to stand out. I think even adults do that.**

Suzi: As a society, as a culture, we still think that grief is this finite thing that we need to get through. And I think once I realized, not back then—I think I realized actually once I became a mother, more than anything—it was just this part of my life that I had to hold. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. So yeah, someone could go back to their job or their school or whatever it is that their life is, and it's never going to be the same again, ever, because you have changed. The essence of who you are has changed. And so nothing is ever the same again. It's a brand-new landscape.

**Dana: Do you remember the last conversation or moment, how your mom looked? What's your last memory with her?**

Suzi: My last memory is one that I wish I didn't have. It's of her in a hospital room. I should tell people that she died of breast cancer, which had come and gone. I think around 11 she got breast cancer. Then it went into remission, or so we thought. It was way before all the pink shirts and the ribbons and the runs and the walks. And we're talking early '90s. And there just wasn't the advocacy and awareness campaigns that there are now, which I'd like to think would have saved her life. It just wasn't talked about as much. And the pressure to go get mammograms and all that stuff just wasn't really there. But regardless, they thought she was treated. They thought that they had gotten it, and then it came back. And then it spread into bone cancer and stuff. So by the time she died, it's hard to say what she died of, other than just cancer. It just kind of took it over.

So my last memory of her is in a hospital room, with her wrists tied to the railings of the bed, so she wouldn't try to get her oxygen mask off, and whatever it was, which is terrifying in itself. And that's a whole 'nother discussion about ways to die. And I have strong feelings about dying in general, and wanting to know more about easing that suffering for everyone involved, having been through it. But that's my last memory, is of my mom laying in a bed, eyes closed, lips chapped—my beautiful, loving mother chained to a hospital bed. It was awful.

I come back to that, because what's really hard for me is I don't have a very good memory. There was some alcoholism in my family in early years, and other things. And I just truly believe that I didn't encode things in such a way that I can bring them back. And so I don't have a lot of super happy memories to share. I think happy memories were appreciated in the moment, but there wasn't room for all of them in my brain, 'cause I was navigating feelings of kind of survival as a kid. There's a lot of fighting, and

it was hard. And even though both of my parents were both very loving, unfortunately for me, I do not have a lot of memories of my mom left. I don't even think they were there. I remember waking up the day after she died, and thinking very clearly to myself, "Yesterday my mom was here, and today she's not." It just felt like I was floating in space from then on.

**Dana: When you saw her that time, did you know that was the last time, for you?**

Suzi: I think I knew what was happening. I remember that there was this room at the end of the hall that had lots of windows. And I had dutifully brought my math homework to do, (laughs) which is hysterical in retrospect. Oh my god, if I could just be there for that child, and just hold her. I was being so stoic and martyrish about the whole thing, 'cause I didn't really have a choice. No one was around to coddle me. I have an older brother, and he was dealing with it in his own 23-year-old way at the time, and same mother. We're the only children [20:00] from that line.

And I think what stands out most for me about that time, I remember having kind of my first spiritual moment regarding my mother, or just regarding kind of the earth. I'd always believed that there was something out there. I'm not religious. My neighbors had ten children, and they were super Catholic. And I loved all their traditions, and they let me be in the plays in the basement. But that wasn't me. But I remember knowing early on in my life that there was something else, even if I still don't maybe have words for what that is. I remember I left the hospital to go to my mom's house to walk her dog. And I remember walking up to the front door. And I remember my dad's cell phone ringing. And I remember knowing that she was gone. And I had been in the hospital, what, 15 minutes before?

And again, it's my dad is driving me. He's not exhibiting a lot of emotions about my mom. I think it's so complicated when there's a divorce in there. It shouldn't be. It shouldn't be. It shouldn't be. It shouldn't be. But again, I look back and —if I was 13, I guess my dad was 33, and that feels young to me now.

So anyway, I went outside. I had the dog. And I just remember there was this beautiful sunset, so I didn't feel alone. I kind of felt more attuned to who I was, and the fact that I felt stronger in my aloneness, if that makes any sense. I felt stronger just knowing that I had something precious. And now it was gone, but I had something. And now that I was different. There was this positive strength that I felt, even though I was reeling. And I think that positive strength has always been a part of who I am, and I'm grateful for it. And I think it still carries me through.

**Dana: You're extremely independent, and you've had to be for so many years, and even maybe before her death.**



Suzi: For sure. I was living in a house where I was basically the baggage. And I kind of got my armor on very early. And then I think the challenge for me was learning when to let the love in. And I think you were and you are, Dana, of all my friends, you're the only one who has ever asked questions, really.

**Dana: Really?**

Suzi: Yeah, really. I think it's hard for people. I think they don't know what to say, and I think you probably have experience with that too.

**Dana: It is hard. And sometimes you don't know what's going to upset someone. You don't know if it's the wrong time. You don't know if it's too hard. And some people are really eager to talk, and some people aren't. And I'm the same way. I didn't want to talk about my mom when she was living.**

Suzi: No, you didn't.

**Dana: (laughs) "Are you kidding?"**

Suzi: No, you did not.

**Dana: "So let's start a fucking podcast during a global pandemic." You know when you know. You know when it's time. You know when you're ready. And so I'm great at asking other people, for years and years, to talk about themselves. But it's hard for me to sometimes say, "I'm struggling," or, "I'm struggling 'cause my mom is dying," or, "I'm worried about my mom."**

Suzi: I look back at the time that our moms grew up, and how culturally how fucked up it was.

**Dana: You've said that a lot. And that's brilliant to think about, the time.**

Suzi: The time—I look back when mom...

**Dana: And when their mothers grew up. And when their moms were, come on, processing nothing.**

Suzi: They basically—and there's a lot of this still, and I've rebelled against it completely and lovingly, this pressure to always look good and be on top of everything and not show emotions. And it's just—even amongst mothers, mothers that I know now call themselves, and we're like, "What the fuck? This is really fucking hard, right?" And I just don't know if that kind of candid conversation was able to happen in the '70s. I don't know. I don't what friendships she had, but it just seemed like, from the outside,

going to the country club with my grandmother and all that stuff, just having to keep up appearances.

**Dana: Did she have close friends or family?**

Suzi: That's a good question. That was the other thing that was really hard. There was no one left. We had to tell her mother that she had died.

**Dana: The worst.**

Suzi: I was 13, and my brother, like I said, was 23. And we had to go to her home that she was living in—I wouldn't even call it a retirement home. It's where you go when you run out of money, shared room. I remember going with him and having to tell her. But that was—talking about motherhood and Mother's Day—holy shit.

**Dana: Telling my grandma's the worst moment of my life, one of the worst moments of my life. I did it over the phone.**

Suzi: We did it in person, but it didn't matter. The lights went off.

**Dana: Really hard.**

Suzi: Really hard. That's the other thing that you and I share. [25:00] When our mothers died, for various reasons their mothers weren't there. Think about that. That's not normal. I don't know what normal is.

**Dana: What is normal? But they weren't there. They weren't next to them, holding their hands, or present in a way that—I argue that maybe my grandmother would have wanted to be there, but was she? And was she let in? Was she allowed in? No.**

Suzi: It's so complicated. I think it's hard when you lose someone, and you don't get that perceived fairy-tale ending that you thought that you should get with someone. And yet you still love them, and yet it's complicated. I think if I could rename your podcast, it would be, *We Lost Our Moms: We Love Them and It Was Complicated*. (laughs)

I will say this: the loss was acutely, acutely painful, and it was very much dulled when I became a mom. I missed her in different ways. All of this has just been so new, since I was standing in that field, since I was navigating the world without her, that I don't even mourn the loss of having her in it on a daily basis, 'cause I literally don't know what that feels like. But I do have to continue to grieve, and just honor the pain when I do feel sad that she's not here and I want to look at my beautiful children, one of whom has her height, and the other one has her smile. And the genes are strong. I don't look like my mom at all, but my kids got it. But while her loss was such a blow—it upended

everything—at the same time, the way that it opened my heart has made me able to heal through loving. And being a mom, for me personally, has been really helpful. It hurts how much I love them, and yet I know they're mine, but they're not really mine. My job is to help get them ready to go forth in the world and be good people and love. And that gift, for me personally, to be able to transform motherhood, which was so loaded and just made me so sad, into something positive, it's been regenerating.

**Dana: That's gorgeous. And by becoming more positive and seeing this side of motherhood that you felt anger towards—the resentment of not having a mother to help you get ready for the world, to set you up with all the tools of success you needed, that she left the party too soon to do that for you, in a way, in many ways before her death—that's incredible to move past that resentment and anger that you might have felt for so long. You were angry about other things as well, that were the situation**

Suzi: I definitely projected the anger onto other things, as we do as humans. Very early on—and this is before I had kids—even when I first met you, choosing art and choosing life felt like it was just the right thing to do. There were a lot of forces—and there always have been—that make existing in the world, as a woman and as a lover and as a person, challenging: the expectations that are overlaid onto us. I look at her—first of all, my mother was gorgeous. And I don't say that...

**Dana: Yeah, she was.**

Suzi: She was a model. She was absolutely gorgeous. I came across a photo of her the other day right after she gave birth to me, and I just laughed, 'cause I'm like, "Who looks that good?" I was all bloated.

**Dana: (laughs) A woman who wears pumps looks like that.**

Suzi: She was just so beautiful. But that worked against her, because she was also very smart. And to have to mitigate being beautiful and smart really was pretty fucking hard and is still hard. But we've made some strides. My way to honor and other woman and other people, and just the world and the earth, is just to try to love and be kind. And I know that sounds so cheesy, but I really feel it in my heart. At the end of the day, we just are people feeling things. And if we can help other people navigate the world, then that's a win. Even if you have loss, that's a win.

David Kessler just wrote a new book.

**Dana: On the sixth stage of grief.**

Suzi: Which is meaning. I would have loved to read that book back when I was 18. [30:00] There is pain. But of course you have to find beauty, and you have to do something with it, because that's how you get out. You have to learn to carry things that are hard, and still find beauty and love—and if not, then what's the point? There is pressure to transform something into something beautiful. I never felt that. And I'm sorry if you felt that, because that's a heavy load to bear.

**Dana: What was so interesting to me was the idea that those stages of grief are not linear, which I know they're not. I know that. But hearing it again and being reminded of it, and then talking about a sixth one, was fascinating, because I think as soon as my mom died, I was in acceptance. And then I went to denial. Then I went to anger. I moved to meaning. Now I'm in anger again. I did not go linear. As soon as I heard she was dead, I was like, "Okay, good. Good. Good. Good. Good. Let her rest in peace." Those five stages, and now the sixth stage of meaning, are ever fluctuating for me. And there are days that I am very angry. I bargain too, even though she's not coming back. But I bargain. I bargain in ways to keep her memory alive. I feel like this is a bargaining tool. This is a way to give her meaning, but it's also bargain.**

**Do you think, somewhere in the back of your mind, you had children to make it right, to do something? Did you make a choice, a conscious choice, to have children for that reason?**

Suzi: I knew that I wanted children very early. I remember driving around in one of my Subaru editions over the years.

**Dana: (laughs) You've had many.**

Suzi: I've had many. And looking in the backseat, and just knowing that I wanted children there. And both choosing the person who I'm married to, Gavin, at a very young age. We got married when I was 23, but also because he was from New Zealand, and it was complicated for visa and all that fun stuff. But I think I chose him knowing that I could create a family. I know that I did. I don't know if I had words for that, but I felt safe. And we have created a home. We created this loving chaos. It's just two young boys. It's a lot, but I also feel that's what I wanted. I felt like I missed out on that. And so not only am I healing through being part of that chaotic, sometimes frustrating, sometimes funny world that I'm able to get something back that I didn't have, and I also feel this intense responsibility and privilege to be a good parent. And it's so selfless.

And I'm not always good at it. Last night—I was alone with the kids for most of the day—and my youngest Miles looked at me on the couch, and he was like, "Mommy, can I just show you?" And I looked at him, and I said, "No, you can't show me right now, because I need some time alone." And ironically, to Brené Brown, I had just listened to

her episode with Glennon Doyle. And there's this part in it where she talks about letting her kids know that it's okay to want alone time. And so I think at the moment when I said no, I was thinking I was all empowered and giving myself space and teaching my kid in the moment that he can have him space. But it totally didn't work, and he just looked at me. He said, "Mommy, you don't want to be around me anymore?" And I was like, #bigfail1227.

**Dana: (laughs) #therapy.**

Suzi: "No, Miles, it's not that. I love you so much. Mommy's brain is kind of full right now." It's also a pandemic, and we're also with each other all the time.

**Dana: Did he stay with you?**

Suzi: Yes, he did. And I was like, "You know what, Miles? I do want to know." Again, I might need my time, but the last thing on earth I want is for my six-year-old to feel like he's been rejected. I think there's other ways to teach him about "Mommy needs space" or "Mommy needs time alone." It wasn't necessarily that moment. But like all good mothers, I do reach my limit.

**Dana: We can talk about your dad, or we can not talk about your dad. But now that you are married to someone who you see is fully present...**

Suzi: I think I was angry at him for so long, 'cause I couldn't get what I needed from him, which was, "That was really hard. I'm really sorry that all this has unfolded as it has, and your mom died, and then we sent you away to boarding school." There's a lot in there to unpack. And I think as you start to unfold and loosen the grip, a lot of that healing isn't really about what you need from that other person, and sometimes it's just sadness that you just have to hold.

I've always given off a pretty tough exterior. Anyone who knows me knows I'm a—my friend used to call me a brass cupcake: kind of hard on the outside, but inside so squishy. I'm not a hardened person at all. But I think in order to navigate life on the level that you need to, and still be part of whatever you're trying to be part of, you figure out how to do that. You figure out how to file things away. Or imagine being back at college (laughs) or having some party, and I was really sad about my mom that day, and everyone's [35:00] like, "Yah!"

**Dana: (laughs) Smoking, drinking.**

Suzi: What are you going to do? You're going to be like, "Hey guys, I just want to let everyone know in this room, I'm really sad about my mom. I don't have the words. I'm just pissed."

**Dana: "I don't have the emotional/social learning I'm going to have in about 20 years, but can you hold my bowl while I...?"**

**And your dad's a product of that generation too—so if we think of the '70s, or '60s—'70s—and so was my father. If your mom didn't have the tools, our fathers certainly didn't.**

Suzi: And so looking backwards, we can't do anything. But looking forwards, we can. One of the ways that I've felt really peaceful is knowing in my heart that just being present for my kids as much as I can—except when they ask me, "Can you look at something?" in that moment that I can't look at it anymore—is just the most beautiful gift. And how privileged and how lucky am I to be able to give them that, because we have a peaceful household, even if it's under stress for whatever the reasons might be. I run my own business—that's super stressful. There's a pandemic—that's super stressful. But I'm just really grateful to be able to have this home where I can focus on the basics, because they're right in my face all the time. And for me personally during this pandemic, that's been I think what's gotten me through. I don't have time to wax poetic all the time. I've got to do stuff. If we had tried to talk about mother loss primarily when I was going through my roughest stages—you still had your mom, but you were a loving friend, and I got to see your mom in her best state.

**Dana: You did.**

Suzi: Shirley Jo remains one of my favorite people. She was such a loving, hands-on mom to you that it sort of helped me see what that looks like, Dana. Because it's not that my mom wasn't loving, it's just that I didn't have her when I was a teenager. But even just to have had that trophy room—oh my god.

**Dana: Oh yes, all my speech awards—I did speech team.**

Suzi: I'm sure there was a huge part of me that was envious of that. I just loved you and your family so much. It was okay. And your mom also saw through the bullshit pretty fast. She kind of knew the score. I'm sure she knew that I was hurting. She didn't come on too heavy. But she made jokes. She's super funny. She made sure I knew where the backup slippers were in the bathroom, just in case I forgot mine, and shelves in the bathroom filled with soaps and rolled towels and slippers. I've never seen anything like it.

**Dana: It's weird too now to think when I learned about your mom's addiction issues and pain and probably some underlining depression, or was a functioning alcoholic, learning all about that.**

Suzi: Undertreated.

**Dana: And I definitely was ignorant enough or innocent enough—more innocent enough—to think, "Well, that would never happen to my mom." I never really understood that that can happen to anyone, because I had never dealt with addiction, or had never understood it to that capacity. Or to look at someone and see them so beautiful and see them so put together in the photos you would show me, and then you're telling me, "She was sick." Not just from breast cancer, but sick in other ways. And so I think now, that when I look back on my life and I look back at the photos of my mother, who was probably a functioning alcoholic for her whole life.**

Suzi: Going through all that same stuff: body issues, alcoholism.

**Dana: Body issues, looking good, presenting a outward-facing appearance.**

Suzi: It's not like either of us were raised in any kind of edgy society. We are born and bred and mostly raised—in my case—in the Midwest, very conservative Midwestern cultures. And I think even though you didn't know why you were at that arts camp probably, for some reasons, there was something in you.

**Dana: "What am I doing here?"**

Suzi: And I think that was what was so beautiful, and always has been. You have an innocence. And you're willing to expose it, and most people are not. I've wanted to wrap you in bubble wrap many, many times, 'cause I knew that you were on a collision course.

**Dana: "You're going to learn some hard truths."**

Suzi: You're going to learn some hard truths. And from the day I met you, it was so refreshing—and probably lifesaving too—to just see someone who was willing to put themselves out there. And that's what you've done, even though you might get hurt, even though you might come across as someone that doesn't know what they're doing. Then there's the whole impostor-syndrome thing that we all feel, but at least there's a word for it. Our moms didn't even have a word for that.

**Dana: I love this new quote: "Be brave enough to suck at something new." And I'm trying to lean into that, 'cause we don't know how to do a lot of things. And that's about power and courage and going out there and doing stuff. But in terms of my mom, I also think she was fearful of appearing—I'm not even talking about addiction—I'm**

**talking about appearing like she wasn't the perfect executive wife, the perfect mother, the perfect teacher. And then when she quit teaching, [40:00] she was like, "What am I, just a stay-at-home mom? What's my purpose in life? What is my career?" And she's also the sister of a woman who was—my mom's sister was disabled slightly. She had some mental challenges, and drowned at 27. So my mom was the oldest child.**

Suzi: I didn't know that, Dana.

**Dana: You didn't? Well, look at us. This is why I started a podcast.**

Suzi: Well, I could have known, but I also could have forgotten. We know how good my memory is.

**Dana: Well, me too. I was like, "Remind me again?"**

Suzi: We've probably talked about this for hours.

**Dana: "Did I tell her this?" And there's things you've said I go, "Did I know that?"**

**So that's a psychological, deeper conversation about her being the oldest child, always having to be perfect. And then you've got my grandmother, who always would talk—even to this day—about how perfect my mom was. "What happened to her? She was so beautiful. She was so smart. She was a biology major. She was the best daughter you could imagine, the most perfect child." And so if my mother was on this podcast, there's no way she wouldn't talk about that, and that this would be her way to process that, even though she should have been doing that in therapy. She should have been doing that through yoga, through friends. But I don't think my mom did. She couldn't process any of that.**

Suzi: Well, she was also a pleaser. They were supposed to be pleasers. I think your mom and my mom, it would be awesome if they could have felt more validated in just being frustrated with the state of the world or the culture or their relationships, and have good outlets. The first thing I did this morning was take my antidepressants, and god, I wish my mom had had access to these, instead of bulimia, instead of alcohol. And yet if we didn't have access to those, I don't know what my things would be.

**Dana: Do you worry about the addictive gene? Bulimia is different than addiction, but do you worry about some of that?**

Suzi: No. In fact, I wish I knew what I had to inherit.

**Dana: Genetically?**



Suzi: Just everything. I don't even know—I just look at myself, and I just see my dad. And I see him in my mannerisms. And I love my dad so much, but there's so much more in me that's my mom, and that's her mother. And that matriarchal lineage was cut off. It was severed. My brother doesn't really want to talk about my mom. He's pretty stoic. He's not opened up. So there's literally no one to mourn my mother with, and that's hard. And I think you probably know what that feels like too, even with your grandmother, who you love so dearly and who you're so lucky to have.

**Dana: Who's 93.**

Suzi: You're going to go see her soon today, at Mother's Day.

**Dana: Through the window. Pandemic Zoom call, which is through the window.**

Suzi: There's a mourning level that she just can't get there. I also have my grandmother still alive, also in her nineties, but on my father's side. He was never close to my mother. They didn't really get along. My dad got married the first time to a woman who already had a kid, and how much stigma is that. You don't get the perfect beginning that you want to brag to all your friends about. It's dark, but that's the truth. But my point is that she never mourned my mom, and she never said anything good about my mom, and still doesn't. She's not trying to be mean. She just doesn't—that's not where she goes mentally. She never felt like it was her responsibility. You and I both have these people in our lives who are maternal towards us, who are our dear friends, but neither one of them really get it.

**Dana: When I think back on it, the moments where my mom was mad—'cause just like we talked about in terms of emotional/social learning—my mom being mad at my grandmother's probably because she was resentful that my grandmother gave more attention, because she had to, to her mentally challenged sister, and forced her to be the perfect—to be the mother, in a way. It forced my mom to grow up so fast. So that's why my mom's mad. But I couldn't turn to her at 15—'cause I would do it now. At 40 years old, I would sit them down, and I'd say, "Let's do this. I'm ready to talk it out. We'll drink." Unfortunately, we probably would have a drink. (laughs) I would enable them both. No, they would probably say, "I'd like a glass of wine," and we would have a conversation. So all this stuff to unpack, I wish I could have had those conversations back then.**

Suzi: It's so hard, 'cause there's so much anger that we got born into. We're all born into ecosystems that are very much established before we come on the scene. And especially now as a parent I realize, you really don't know what you're doing. You're trying your best, but you really don't know what you're doing. And I look back on them, and I don't fault my mom. I've never been mad at my mom for the drinking. She actually

got sober—what a feat. I've never felt resentful towards my mom ever, and maybe that's its own podcast (laughs). But I just have always known she did the best she could with what she had.

**Dana: Do you try to give yourself that same forgiveness? You said in the same one-minute breath, you said, "I don't always do it right. I'm not perfect." Are there moments for you as a mother where you go, "I did okay. That wasn't that bad." [45:00] I know you think that. I've heard you say it. So I want you to say it here.**

Suzi: The other night, I looked at my husband, and I was like, "I was a good fucking mom today." And I don't even remember what happened that day. I don't remember. I was present. I was there for my kids. I have friends who struggle with that same perfectionist thing that maybe our parents did. I don't have that at all. (laughs) I think that's really the saving grace in all that. And I think that one of the reasons I don't is I have absolutely nothing to compare it to. I have no idea what it feels like to have a pretty healthy, functioning family. That's all new. I'm making it up as we go along. And I don't have any idea how you're supposed to mother, except that I know that I want my kids to feel safe and loved, and I want to support who they are. And that stuff is maybe because I've gone through what I've gone through over years and years of me personally having to feel like the other, or feeling outside. Absolutely the person I am today, which I'm proud of and is still evolving, is intricately tied to losing my mother and navigating the world without her.

**Dana: Do you talk about her with your boys?**

Suzi: I do. It feels kind of fake. It's like, "Well, Grandma Linda would have loved you," and, "She would have given you lots of things to eat that you would have liked." And they're like, "Aw, we miss Grandma." It just feels pretty contrived. And I do tell my children, I really do experience love in the earth and in nature and music and art and creativity. That is the marrow of life, all the simple beauty that I was too angsty and busy to see. I feel like I'm 85 years old, 'cause I'm like, "I love the birds," and I want to go dig in my garden.

**Dana: (laughs) You live in a pretty amazing place also, to love that.**

Suzi: It's also under snow for half the year, but yes.

**Dana: (laughs) That's true. But you're surrounded by such beauty, so what a blessing.**

Suzi: In order to notice beauty like that, Dana, I think we have to feel safe.

**Dana: True.**

Suzi: Yes, I created a business. And yes, I have a career. And yes, I created a house with my husband by renovating it for way too long ourselves. In helping craft a life where I feel safe, I'm now able to be a little softer, and just kind of have it not be about me so much, and just want to give, give, give, give, give, give. That's all I really want to do. I just want to give. I swear to god, all I want to do is give. I want to make people feel good. I want to alleviate pain. I want to give people purpose. And I don't get to do that every day, but it's something that I aspire to, and makes me feel better about any pain that I've experienced. And also knowing that some beautiful things can come from pain.

So, do I regret my mom dying early? Abso-fucking-lutely. But do I feel like I'm able to honor her? Every day—mostly every day, yes.

**Dana: And that's the meaning.**

Suzi: And that's the meaning, yeah, at least for me right now in my crazy, busy world of having young kids and wiping off groceries. And that's the meaning. Watching you go through mother loss later, and during a time period that we weren't as close, was hard, because as your friend, I knew you were hurting so much. But I also knew that you needed to go through, that just you had to go through the thing. And you have to continue to go through it. I'm really psyched to see what you do with this podcast and hear what things you explore. Because while you can't sit down with Nana and Shirley Jo in a room, I think you can get to a lot of that through connecting to people and helping them tell their stories. So I'm really excited for you.

**Dana: Thank you. I love you. My mom loved you. And it means a lot. And I know that starting on Mother's Day, there was really only one person I was going to talk to, and that was you. So I appreciate you sharing so much about your mom. Even though I know my friends are all amazing and have incredible things to say, I think I was putting so much ownership on me, that I'd have to do all this work. I'd have to have prewritten questions, even though I didn't. I had a couple prewritten in my head, but I didn't use half of them. The point is, I never thought for a fucking minute that you would be so profoundly stunning and so completely—you've thought about so much of this. I know that you do this for a living, but you're not a podcast person that people interview. What I'm saying to you, my friend, is I did not know that you did all the work. You're the star, and that should be the focus of the podcast. I get that. It's my friends. But you proved it, is what I'm trying to say. You proved it, that it's like, "Just talk to the people you love. They got you."**

Suzi: [50:00] It's this complex fabric of what it is to be human. Even if you're not a mom yet, or even if you haven't lost your mom, it's just we're all part of this world

together, and we're only here for so long. So there's going to be loss and there's going to be living, and it's how we're going to navigate those two things.

**Dana: I wanted to ask you if you could tell the listeners your mother's name. And when you think about her right now, after this conversation we've had, what do you think about? How do you feel?**

Suzi: So my mother was born Linda Mary Raaf. And when I think about my mom after talking to you, I feel gratitude, because love is love, and the same love we all need is woven into our friendships and our relationships. I love you so much. You're just part of who I am. I'm grateful to have a friend like that.

**Dana: I love you. Thanks so much for doing this.**

Suzi: I'm going to start my car. We're going get that sound of that. Alright, my car's on. I guess I should probably stop talking to you from my car.

**Dana: You should go home and be a parent. Get out of here.**

Suzi: Eh, I'll think about it. Alright, I love you, friend.

**Dana: Love you. I'll talk to you later.**

**[start outro] Almost every single person I have interviewed so far has said, "Thank you. Thank you for letting me talk about my mom." Some have said, "Thank you for letting me talk about my mom, because it's my favorite thing to do." And some have said, "I didn't really know if I wanted to do this, and I was nervous. But I needed it. Thank you." So I guess I just wanted to say thank you, for letting me talk about mine.**

**I didn't want to talk about my mom, and I avoided it at all costs when she was living, for about ten years before her death. I just didn't even want to address it. I didn't know how to explain it. I didn't want to look at it. And I thought if I could just pretend it wasn't happening, then it wasn't happening. I would even avoid it in therapy. I would be prattling on about my dog or some work thing or some audition in some storefront theater, and my therapist would stop me and say, "So, you have about ten minutes left in your session. Just let me know if you want to talk about your mom."**

**Speaking of therapists, my therapist told me that is real power in peer-to-peer conversations and giving support to people who need it, that you don't need a fancy degree to just sit with someone and listen to them and connect as two regular people. You don't even need a podcast. If you think that you have the capacity and energy to listen to someone who's grieving, to sit with them and be curious, with no judgment, to just let them feel safe and heard, that that is a gift to the grieving. If you know**

someone who's lost a parent or a friend or a sister or a loved one or a grandparent, just let them talk about them. And if you're curious, and you want to know more about their loved one, and they seem willing to talk, just ask them questions. I know it's scary, and you think you're going to say the wrong thing, and you might. But I think if you come to the table with good intentions and a good heart and open arms to just share space with people, it's such a gift.

So I'm going to take a little break. I'm going to end this season with this episode. And I hope to come back in the fall, but hey, grief isn't linear, and neither is podcasting. So I just wanted to say thank you all, for listening and sharing and reaching out to me and subscribing and letting me come into your ears during this crazy time. It's been really awesome for me, and I thank you all for the love and support that you've given to me. I really needed it.

And I couldn't have done this without Suzi Pond and Alice Anderson with Redbird Media Group; Na'Toria Marketing and Design; Meredith Montgomery; Matt Chapman; Jill Wolf; Heather Bodie; Lora Nicole; Danny Bravman; Courtney Rioux; Jonathan Baude; and all of my guests, who have been incredible, even interviews you haven't even heard yet. You've all been amazing and you've changed my life, so thanks for sharing space with me during a global pandemic.

The week that I'm recording this, the first day of this week started with a full moon. And I was driving to my allergist in Chicago. And I was listening to this song on the radio, and it was so beautiful and melodic, and I was like, "Ooh, I love this jam." And I just started really getting into the song and listening to it. And then all of a sudden, I was starting to flashback to my childhood, five years old, my mom leaving little notes in my lunchbox, telling me she loved me. And then flashing forward to her calling me and asking me to call her back, when she was really sick, and I would just ignore the calls. I just wouldn't pick up. Or her asking me to sleep with her in her bed when she was sick, and I said, "I don't want to. I'm going to sleep upstairs." Or [55:00] the memories of her standing naked in her bathroom, blow-drying her hair, which is something I do now. The exact same thing my dead mom did, I do now, buck naked blow-drying my hair.

And I just started crying uncontrollably, choking on my own mucus, snot running down my face. I couldn't breathe. I had to pull the car over and just let it out. I turned that song off eventually—I listened to it later though, it's so good—and just let myself cry. I had to pull some tissue out. I grabbed some water. And I just took a couple deep breaths. And just sat there. I remember thinking in that moment that I really wished my mom could see me crying, and she could absolve me of all my guilts and shame and sadness. Or she could tell me that she did love me, and she forgave me for

everything, and it's okay. But she couldn't. She's not here. I had to do that for myself. I had to tell myself it was okay. And I had to just sit in it.

And then eventually I had to turn the car back on and get to my allergist, because pollen is rough right now. And I remember feeling really heavy the rest of the day, which I know a lot of people talk about. If you've had a big cry, it sits with you for the day. It kind of just always sits underneath the rest of your day. And I was sad, and my eyes were puffy, and I had no makeup on. But I felt so good, because that guilt doesn't serve me. That shame, that regret isn't going to help me. And I felt so much lighter by just getting it out.

And then I went and posted it on the podcast Instagram page, because to me, that's where I took it. I took it to that community. I took it to a lot of you who are listening. I took it to people who might understand. And that made me feel so less alone. And it also really felt like something I wished my mom could have done. I wished she had talked to people. I wished she'd been able to get help. I wish she'd had an Instagram page. Oh man, god, it would have been filled with Chico's jackets and pictures of impatiens and all her labeling equipment, 3M Post-it Notes. She would have just posted pictures of things she loved. What a community she would have had.

So I just wanted to thank you all again, and tell you that I'm still on this ride, every day. Even if I sound like I'm funny and sassy, it all still lives underneath. It's all still present. And that's A-okay.

For the record, my mom's name was Shirley Jo Black. Sometimes she just went by Jo. Sometimes she went by Shirley Jo. Sometimes she went by Jo Mama. And in this moment, when I think about her, today, right now, as I'm recording this last episode, I am smiling. You can't see me. You cannot see me, but I hope you can hear it, because my mom was a light, a ray of light and laughter and ballsy jokes and big hugs and dinner parties and hosting and fabulous fashion and gardening and friendships, and just a great mom, and a good wife, and a good daughter, and a good friend. And my mom was sick. And my mom struggled. And my mom could be mean and nasty and manipulative and vindictive and sad. But she was my mom. And I hope I never, ever, ever stop talking about her.

Love to you all. Be well. Be safe. And hopefully I'll talk to you next time. [end 59:13]